A Lesson before Dying Study Guide

A Lesson before Dying by Ernest Gaines

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Introduction

Published by Knopf in 1993, *A Lesson Before Dying* is set in Louisiana. Considered a success by readers and critics alike, the appeal for most readers is derived from the intense emotions the story evokes. The author, Ernest Gaines, wants the reader to feel compassion for the young black man, Jefferson, whom jurors convict for a murder he did not commit. Nor can readers ignore the personal struggles of Grant Wiggins as he teaches Jefferson to be a man.

Gaines credits his boyhood experiences for his ability to develop lifelike characters. In an interview with Paul Desruisseaux for the *New York Times Book Review,* Gaines says he learned by "working in the fields, going fishing in the swamps with the older people, and, especially, listening to the people who came to my aunt's house, the aunt who raised me." His attention to the people he loves results in characters that are believable. Alice Walker, in the *New York Times Book Review,* acknowledges Gaines's success with characterization in saying that Gaines "claims and revels in the rich heritage of Southern Black people and their customs; the community he feels with them is unmistakable and goes deeper even than pride.... Gaines is mellow with historical reflection, supple with wit, relaxed and expansive because he does not equate his people with failure."

Gaines's themes reveal universal truths. He demonstrates that racism destroys people; relationships suffer from people's choices; and pride, honor, and manhood can prevail in trying times. While some critics denounce Gaines for his failure to address blacks' difficulties in today's society, his defense is that he writes for all times and all people.

Author Biography

Ernest J. Gaines, EJ for short, was born in the slave area of a Louisiana plantation on January 15, 1933. His father, Manuel, and mother, Adrienne J. (Colar) Gaines, worked as plantation laborers. Gaines's Aunt Augusteen cared for Gaines and his siblings as they grew up in "the Quarters." Gaines's earliest memories reflect times spent on his aunt's front porch listening to her friends' stories. After Gaines learned to read and write, he enjoyed writing letters for his aunt and her elderly friends. Through listening and writing, Gaines grew to understand himself and his people.

Gaines moved to San Francisco, California, with his mother and stepfather when he was fifteen years old. San Francisco offered Gaines a world of new experiences far removed from his aunt's front porch. Most importantly, he discovered libraries in San Francisco and quickly became an avid reader. Homesick for family, friends, and the Southern plantation lifestyle he had known, Gaines read any fiction he could find that was set in his homeland. He discovered that writers often gave the wrong impression of Southern blacks and the lives they led. These writers were white and had no personal experience with the kind of life Gaines knew existed for Southern blacks. He decided then to write those missing stories. He read other authors whose works he admired: Faulkner, Hemingway, Flaubert, and de Maupassant. The Russian writers, though, inspired him the most. Their stories about Russian peasants offered him a model for writing about the people he knew best.

In the meantime, Gaines graduated with a bachelor of arts degree from San Francisco State College in 1957 and completed graduate work at Stanford University in 1959. In 1962, a young black man named James Meredith tried to enter the University of Mississippi Law School, prompting civil rights demonstrations and violence. Gaines admired Meredith for his determination and courage. As a result, Gaines vowed to dedicate himself to writing about the Southern black experience. After returning to Louisiana, Gaines completed his first novel, *Catherine Carmier.* This 1964 success marked the beginning of his writing career.

Drawing from the stories he heard at his aunt's knee, Gaines writes about the people, places, and daily events of the rural South. Critics have always admired his work. They praise his portrayal of realistic characters and his capable handling of emotional themes: racism, personal relationships, social pressures, social change, and others. Jerry H. Bryant summarizes his talent in a comment in the *Iowa Review.* He asserts that his fiction "contains the austere dignity and simplicity of ancient epic, a concern with man's most powerful emotions and the actions that arise from those emotions, and an artistic intuition that carefully keeps such passions and behavior under fictive control. Gaines may be one of our most naturally gifted storytellers."

Plot Summary

Before the Jail Visits

A Lesson Before Dying examines the relationship established between two men in a rural Louisiana parish in the 1940s. One man, Jefferson, is convicted of murder and sentenced to die in the electric chair. The other man, Grant Wiggins, is the local schoolteacher.

The book is told from the point of view of Grant. Although he does not attend Jefferson's trial, he is able to give details from it because everybody in their small community has been talking about it.

He explains that Jefferson ended up in trouble because he had received a ride from some friends: they stopped at a liquor store before taking him home, and when the friends tried to rob the store a shoot out occurred, leaving both of his friends and the owner of the store, who was white, dead. Panicking, Jefferson took money from the open cash register before fleeing, and the all-white jury found him guilty of both robbery and murder.

His lawyer, in trying to convince the jury to not impose the death penalty, portrayed Jefferson as being subhuman, presenting him as being too stupid to knowingly be guilty of a crime: "What justice would there be to take this life?" he asked them. "Why, I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this." The afternoon that he is sentenced to die, Jefferson's godmother, who raised him, comes to see Grant, to ask him to visit Jefferson in jail before his execution and to educate him. "I don't want them to kill no hog," she explains. "I want a man to go to that chair, on his own two feet."

Grant is hesitant about getting involved, unsure of what he can do to make Jefferson's life any better in the few weeks that he has left, but Jefferson's godmother, Miss Emma Glenn, is close friends with Grant's aunt, Tante Lou, whom he lives with, and she convinces him to do as Miss Emma asks. Before visits can be arranged, Grant is forced to go through the humiliating process of beseeching the sheriff's cousin for the sheriff's permission, and then being interviewed by the sheriff himself, to make sure that he will not cause any "aggravation."

With permission to proceed with regular visits to the prisoner, Grant has two experiences at the school where he works that bring some perspective to his own life. The superintendent of the schools visits, and Grant finds himself acting servile to him, the way a black man is expected to behave toward a white man, in order to assure that his little one-room school will be kept open. Also, he observes the old men who deliver his wood, and then the school children that he sends out to chop the wood: "And I thought to myself, What am I doing? Am I reaching them at all? They are acting exactly as the old men did earlier. They are fifty years younger, maybe more, but doing the

same things those old men did who never attended a day of school in their lives. Is this just a vicious circle? Am I doing anything?"

Visits to Jefferson

Grant is reluctant to become involved with Jefferson from the start, and Jefferson is just as reluctant about receiving visitors. The first few visits, Grant comes with Miss Emma, and then he comes alone. Jefferson does not talk when Miss Emma, whom he calls his nannan, is around, but alone with Grant he bitterly asks about the electric chair and says that he is just a hog, while Grant insists that he is a man.

At the same time, Reverend Ambrose starts visiting Jefferson. Tante Lou, Miss Emma and the Reverend all wish that Grant would try to get Jefferson to be more concerned about his soul and getting into heaven, but Grant, though he believes in God, is not willing to promote their religious beliefs. When he talks with his girlfriend, Vivian, Grant expresses his fondest wish would be for them to leave the parish, to leave the South, as almost everyone who grew up in the area and gotten an education has done before, but he feels stuck there because Vivian's divorce is not final (actually, she points out, he left once, to live with his parents in California, but he came back on his own). At the school Christmas pageant, there is only one package under the tree, with a pair of warm socks and a wool sweater for Jefferson, indicating how much the community is thinking about his imminent execution.

After the date for the execution is set at April 8th, the second Friday after Easter, Jefferson becomes a little less bitter, and he becomes even more at ease with his situation when Grant brings him a radio, although the Reverend and the women are upset that he is listening to music when he should be thinking about God. Jefferson agrees to accept a pencil and a pad of paper to write down things that he might want to talk about during their visits. In the meantime, Grant loses some of the detached cool that he has maintained throughout the ordeal, starting a bar fight with a few mulattos who make racist remarks and say that Jefferson should die. Vivian reminds Grant of the danger that he puts her, and all of the people who depend on him, in when he acts recklessly. At their last visit together, Jefferson is still angry about his fate, but he promises to face it with as much calm as he can, for the sake of his nannan.

The Execution and After

Chapter 29 consists of excerpts from Jefferson's diary, written in his uneducated grammar. He describes his fears and his doubts, but also his relief that he has been able to comfort Miss Emma a little, and that she was able to kiss him for the first time. Chapter 30 describes the day of the execution from the points of view of different citizens in the town: those who saw the truck with the electric chair arrive, those who saw it taken into the courthouse, the deputies who were responsible for having Jefferson's head, arm and leg shaved, the people shopping two blocks away who can hear the generator that powers the electric chair, etc.

At his school out in the country, Grant has his children kneel in prayer from twelve o'clock until they receive word that the execution is over, just as Vivian earlier said she planned do with her students. The sheriff's deputy, Paul, who had been the only white man to treat him with respect during his visits to the jail, drives out to the school after it is over, bringing Jefferson's diary to him. "I don't know what you're going to say when you go back in there," Paul tells him. "But tell them he was the bravest man in that room today. I'm a witness, Grant Wiggins. Tell them so." Grant suggests that Paul might come back one day and tell them himself, and he responds, "It would be an honor." When he returns to the classroom, Grant, who has been a stern schoolmaster and a reluctant participant in Jefferson's final days, is crying.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The first chapter of A *Lesson Before Dying* opens with an unnamed narrator describing his experiences, sitting in a courtroom with two women, as a trial unfolds before them. The women, the narrator's aunt and the godmother of the man who is being tried, remain riveted by the proceedings. The narrator says that all present in the courtroom know what the outcome of this trial will be.

"I was not there, yet I was there," says the narrator. "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. I was there as much as anyone else was there."

The courtroom proceedings revolve around Jefferson, a young African American man, who got into trouble when offered a ride to the White Rabbit Bar and Lounge by Brother and Bear. In the car, Brother and Bear ask Jefferson for money. He tells them that he has none; but the men decide that they will probably be able to buy alcohol on credit from the owner of the bar. Alcee Grope, the owner, knows they will have money once grinding season arrives. The three men find the White Rabbit Bar and Lounge empty except for the bar's white owner.

Brother and Bear ask Grope for a bottle of Apple White wine. Grope suspects that Brother and Bear have been drinking. He asks if they have money. Brother and Bear put what money they have on the counter, but it is not enough to pay for the wine. The boys ask Grope to give them the wine on credit, but Grope refuses.

Glassy-eyed and unsteady, Bear begins walking around the counter toward Grope. The bar owner warns him away verbally, but Bear does not stop. Grope grabs a gun from his cash register and begins shooting, but bullets also come from another direction. In a matter of moments, Brother, Bear and Grope are on the floor of the bar.

Jefferson is seized with a terrible panic. Although he is terrified, Jefferson hears a voice calling him and realizes that Grope is not dead. He walks to the end of the counter to see Grope and Bear sprawled between the counter and the shelves. Both are covered in broken glass, blood and alcohol. Grope continues calling Jefferson, by calling, "Boy? Boy? Boy?" Jefferson assumes that he will be blamed for the deaths and tells Grope that he has done nothing. As he is speaking, Grope dies.

Unsure of what to do next, Jefferson grabs a bottle of whiskey and takes a gulp. The alcohol helps clear his head, but the severity of his situation hits him hard. He feels he has no choice but to run. Jefferson stuffs some cash into his pockets and takes the whiskey. He is halfway to the door when two white men walk in.

In the court room, the unnamed narrator and Jefferson's family members listen as the prosecutor tells the jury that Jefferson, Brother and Bear went to the White Rabbit Bar

and Lounge with the idea of robbing Alcee Grope and killing him, so that they could not be identified. According to the prosecuting attorney, Jefferson killed his accomplices as well as Grope and planned to take the cash himself.

Jefferson's defense attorney argues that the young man is only guilty only of being in the worst possible place at the worst possible time. He points out that there is no proof of a conspiracy between Brother, Bear and Jefferson. The fact that Grope shot the other two men is offered as more proof of Jefferson's innocence. Why, he asks, would Grope have shot at one boy twice and never shot at Jefferson? Jefferson's possession of the whiskey is justified as an action taken to calm his nerves. The attorney says that he took the money because he is stupid.

In closing, the defense attorney appeals to the jury's sense of mercy by calling Jefferson a fool. He describes the shape of Jefferson's skull and face, asking jury members to see if they can find a trace of intelligence in his eyes. Inferring that Jefferson is incapable of planning what he is on trial for, the attorney says his client deserves mercy because his female relatives will have nothing to live for if he is put to death. The attorney ends his arguments by comparing Jefferson to a hog and states that killing a hog would serve as much justice as killing his client.

The jury quickly returns a guilty verdict on the counts of robbery and first-degree murder Jefferson is sentenced to death by electrocution. An execution date is to be set by the governor at a later time.

Chapter 1 Analysis

A *Lesson Before Dying* takes place in a small Cajun community in Louisiana in the 1940s, where a young African American man faces charges of robbery and first-degree murder. The unnamed narrator, and those around him in the court, expect Jefferson to be convicted and sentenced to death. The foreknowledge of Jefferson's conviction might be shared by the accused, but his thoughts are not presented. What is shown is the terror Jefferson feels during the robbery and murders. His attempt at flight illustrates Jefferson's low expectation for justice.

The prosecutor's attack on Jefferson is predictable. The defense attorney's arguments for Jefferson's innocence, and his use of the term hog, offer a searing portrayal of racism. The lack of response to these proceedings by Jefferson's female relatives is notable. It is possible that these characters feel they will endanger Jefferson further if they cause an outburst; or possibly they are numb to what is happening around them.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

In the second chapter, the narrator is identified as Grant Wiggins, an African American teacher. He returns home after school to find his aunt, Tante Lou, and Jefferson's godmother, Miss Emma, seated at the kitchen table. Jefferson's trial is over. Grant wishes that he could visit the Rainbow Club in Bayonne, but Tante Lou makes him talk with Miss Emma.

Miss Emma begins by stating that the defense attorney's use of the term, "hog," upsets her. She tells Grant that she, "Don't want them to kill no hog. I want a man to go to that chair, on his own two feet." Grant asks Miss Emma and Tante Lou what they think he can do. The women remind Grant that he is a teacher. He responds by saying that he teaches reading, writing and math, but that he has never been told, "how to keep a black boy out of a liquor store." After being chastised by his aunt for being rude, Grant is persuaded to speak to Henri Pichot, the local sheriff's brother in law, about seeing Jefferson.

Chapter 2 Analysis

In Chapter 2, the aftermath of Jefferson's trial and sentencing becomes clear. Grant is thrust into a unique role, as Tante Lou and Miss Emma press him to speak with the sheriff's brother in law to arrange a visit with Jefferson. It's possible the women feel Grant, as a teacher and a male, will have more credibility with Henri Pichot than they will.

Grant is distinctly uncomfortable with the request to speak to Henri Pichot because he does not see the benefit to Jefferson. Grant also feels that being a teacher does not make him a negotiator.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Grant drives Miss Emma and Tante Lou to Henri Pichot's home. At the side gate of Pichot's home, Tante Lou starts to get out of the car to open the gate. Grant tells her to keep her seat, because he "has nothing to do all that day but serve." Pichot never uses the side gate. Grant reminds his aunt that it is she who once said she never wanted him to use the back door again. Miss Emma says that Grant does not have to go; but Grant knows that she does not mean it.

At the back door of the home, a maid, Inez Lane, who is aware of the verdict of Jefferson's trial, greets Grant, Miss Emma and Tante Lou. They wait in the kitchen until Henri Pichot and his guest, Louis Rougon, appear. Louis Rougon's family owns a bank in a neighboring town. Miss Emma tells Pichot that she has come to ask for a favor. Before she can discuss what she wants, Pichot tells her that he cannot change what has happened. He says that he spoke up for Jefferson before the trial, but is unable to do more.

Miss Emma explains that Jefferson was called a hog during the trial, and that since she did not raise a hog, she does not want him to go to the electric chair as anything less than a man. She then tells Pichot that she wants him to speak to the sheriff to see if a visit between Grant and Jefferson can be arranged. She also explains that she wants Grant to make Jefferson know that he is a man before he is executed. Miss Emma reminds Pichot that she has done a lot for his family over the years.

Pichot reluctantly agrees to the request, but refuses to tell Miss Emma when he will do so.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Grant grows resentful of the roles he is being pressed into by Tante Lou and Miss Emma. He resents using the back door at Pichot's home and having to remain in the kitchen to talk. Tante Lou, Miss Emma and Grant are never offered refreshment; nor are they invited to sit down, as a white guest would be.

As Miss Emma asks for Pichot's help in arranging a way for Grant to visit Jefferson, Pichot's attitude and impatience are a stark contrast to Miss Emma's courage. Although she gains Pichot's grudging cooperation, she does not get everything she wants.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Grant returns Miss Emma and Tante Lou to their home. He angers Tante Lou by telling her that he will eat in Bayonne. He goes to the Rainbow Club, owned by Joe and Thelma Clairborne. After ordering shrimp for dinner, he uses the telephone in the club to call Vivian Baptiste, a fellow teacher who is his love.

Vivian is beautiful and intelligent, but a mother and married to another man. She arranges for a babysitter so that she can see Grant at the Rainbow Club. Grant discusses the possibility of running away with her, as he is sick of his responsibilities; but this angers Vivian. She threatens to leave the club if he continues talking like this.

Grant explains that he does not want to spend his life teaching children on a plantation, and longs to have more control over his life. Vivian points out that she is still married to another man; but Grant distrusts her claim that she will leave after a divorce. Vivian asks Grant why he has not gone somewhere else if he is so tired of his life. Grant tells her that he has remained because of her. Vivian reminds Grant that he left to visit his parents in California, and demands to know why he returned. Grant asks if she will leave with him after she divorces. Vivian says she will.

As the couple dances, Grant tells Vivian that Jefferson received the death penalty, and about the visit to the Pichot home. He adds that he does not feel he can accomplish anything useful for Jefferson, as he will be killed anyway. Vivian tells Grant that she wants him to see Jefferson.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Grant's refusal to eat his aunt's food is a display of the anger he feels for his situation, more than it is a reflection of what he feels for Tante Lou or Miss Emma. His refusal to eat her cooking is an attempt to show his aunt that she does not control everything in his life. Grant does not seem to have known that Tante Lou and Miss Emma wanted him to be the person to see Jefferson, prior to the visit to the Pichot home. He is very unhappy with this demand, which seems unreasonable.

Grant's trip to see Vivian in Bayonne is an escape. Although he is gone for only a few hours, the journey gives him an opportunity to blow off steam and find compassion. Vivian sympathizes, but reminds him that he has left and returned before. Grant's decision to return to be near her is a clear testament to the depth of his love, and he takes strength from her promise that she will leave following a divorce. Vivian's adds her voice to those of Tante Lou and Miss Emma in asking Grant to try to see Jefferson. This helps to ensure Grant's cooperation.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Grant is in the classroom, where he teaches between October and April. During the other months, the students work in the fields. The students are practicing Bible verses and the Pledge of Allegiance. The children are in primer, which is similar to Kindergarten, through the sixth grade. Grant assigns three sixth-grade students to teach primer, first and second grade students, while he teaches the older ones. Grant worries about having offended Tante Lou by not eating her food the evening before. In the morning, Tante Lou tells Grant that food is available, but makes a point about not caring if he eats or not.

After snapping at a student, Grant goes outside to walk along the road. The houses seem gray as Grant thinks about their occupants, all of whom he knows well. Grant's students are aware that their teacher's mood is poor. They try to follow his instructions to avoid being berated. A first-grade student is playing with a bug on his sleeve when Grant comes back to the class. Grant whacks him on the head with a ruler and yells at him to get rid of the bug. The child is reduced to tears, but takes the bug outside. Grant demands to know if the students know what is happening in Bayonne, or what will happen to someone who is just like them. The students do not respond to this; and Grant launches into a rant to outline what Jefferson is facing.

Although Grant knows this is frightening, he is unable to stop himself. He tells the class that Jefferson was called a hog during the trial. Grant relates that he has been asked to try to turn Jefferson into a man. He says that he is responsible for turning his students into good citizens, and asks if it makes sense for them to avoid studying. One young girl begins to cry and is told to leave if she is unable to control her emotions. The girl, Estelle, tells Grant that Jefferson is her cousin; yet Grant does not offer her any sympathy.

At 2:00pm, Farrell Jarreau comes to Grant's classroom. Jarreau, an employee of Henri Pichot, tells Grant that he is to come to Pichot's house at 5:00pm. He leaves without waiting for Grant's response.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Grant's attempts to reconcile with Tante Lou are met with a cold shoulder. He feels some remorse for his refusal to eat the food she had prepared the night before, but does not confront her directly to apologize. He still feels anger at being thrust into the role she has planned for him, yet he is respectful of his aunt.

Grant is emerging as a reluctant, unlikely hero. His sense of helplessness in the face of enormous adversity causes him to lash out at his blameless students. When the children are frightened, he offers no sympathy. This lack of empathy makes him seem

as unlikable as Henri Pichot, who showed little kindness to Miss Emma in a previous chapter.

Jarreau's appearance in Grant's classroom, to summon the teacher to Pichot's home, is an announcement that Pichot has news. Jarreau does not wait for Grant's response, as there is no possible response other than to appear at the appointed time. This is another indicator of Grant's perceived inferiority in Pichot's eyes, and another form of racism.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Grant finds Tante Lou and Miss Emma at home when he returns from school, but goes to Pichot's home ten minutes early. Inez, who has been crying, offers him a seat and a cup of coffee, which Grant refuses. Inez tells Grant that Louis Rougon is with Pichot. By 5:15pm, the sheriff has not appeared; and Grant is still in the kitchen with Inez, where he remains.

At 5:30pm, Sam Guidry, the sheriff, and his wife, Edna Guidry, are heard entering the house. Edna Guidry comes to the kitchen and talks with Grant and Inez in a friendly manner. She tells Grant that she is deeply upset by Jefferson's fate and pours herself a drink, before telling Grant that the sheriff will see him after dinner.

As Inez serves, she gives Grant quick appraisals of what is being discussed by Guidry, Pichot and Rougon. She says that Guidry is against the idea of Grant seeing Jefferson. Grant responds to this statement by saying that a refusal of the request would ease his mind.

Sam Guidry, Henri Pichot, Louis Rougon and an unknown fat man enter the kitchen at 6:45pm. Inez leaves Grant alone with the white men. Pichot seems more fatigued and sympathetic to Grant than he did the day before. Guidry opens the conversation by asking what Grant wants, something he is already well aware of. Grant and the sheriff bicker. Grant assures Guidry again that he would rather not have anything to do with seeing Jefferson. Guidry says that he and Grant are in agreement, but that his wife feels differently. Then, he asks Grant who is right, him or his wife? Grant sidesteps the trap by stating that he does not involve himself in family business, a comment that the unknown fat man does not seem to like. Guidry replies, "You're smart. Maybe you're just a little too smart for our own good." Finally, Grant is given permission to see Jefferson, with the condition that visitation arrangements are over if there are any signs of trouble. Guidry tells Grant that he can visit with Jefferson in a couple of weeks.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Although Grant goes to Pichot's home ten minutes early for his appointment, he is kept waiting in the kitchen for two and a half hours. This time frame is a clear insult and another attempt to put Grant in his place as an inferior. As Grant seethes at being made to wait, Edna Guidry, Sheriff Sam Guidry's wife, enters. Her pleasant demeanor and condolences on the outcome of Jefferson's trial are a contrast to the behavior of the other white characters.

When Sam Guidry finally appears in the kitchen, he is with Henri Pichot, Louis Rougon and an unknown fat man. The men are very observant, as though they anticipate trouble, and do not want to miss it. Their presence strengthens Guidry, who tells Grant

that he is against the idea of the visits with Jefferson. This is, however, something Grant has in common with Guidry. Both men are honest; and Guidry's reluctant permission for the visits is a surprise.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

In Chapter 7, the superintendent of schools, Dr. Joseph Morgan, makes an annual visit to the school where Grant teaches. A warning of the impending visit is delivered from Henri Pichot to Grant through Farrell Jarreau. In preparation, Grant instructs his students to bathe each morning and to show up wearing their best clothes each day. He drills them on how to behave.

Dr. Morgan calls Grant "Higgins," instead of Wiggins, throughout the chapter. He is critical of the school's unsophisticated features, but praises the students' performance. One child gives a poor rendition of the Pledge of Allegiance; however Dr. Joseph is unfazed. The superintendent also inspects teeth by asking children to spread their lips. Grant is polite, but thinks about slave owners who once inspected the teeth of slaves this way.

Dr. Morgan lectures the students on the value of nutrition, specifically beans, fish and greens. Exercise, he says, is best obtained by picking cotton, pulling onions and gathering potatoes. At the conclusion of the visit, Dr. Morgan tells Grant that he should be proud of his, "crop," of children. Grant hates himself for drilling the students as much as he has. Grant's requests for new materials and supplies are brushed aside; however, he is urged to teach more about hygiene and the flag. Grant says that many of his students had never seen a toothbrush before coming to school. Dr. Morgan tells him to get his students, "off their lazy butts" to pick pecans to earn money for toothbrushes.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Another white male character with a superior attitude is introduced in the form of Dr. Joseph Morgan, superintendent of schools. His visit is mandatory, or he would not be at the school. He does not display respect for Grant or the students, yet tells Grant that he is doing a good job and should be proud of the children. This is another show of bigotry. Morgan masks his racism with kind words and praise but, when pushed, reveals that he has no respect for Grant or the students.

Grants requests for supplies and books are brushed aside, as his students are clearly not important to Dr. Joseph. His visit ends; but Grant is left with a feeling of self-hatred for having drilled the children to please someone who will never care about them. In doing so, he has made an attempt to please a racist, who will do nothing to help him or his students, and forced his students to do the same.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The first load of firewood is delivered to the school. Grant observes the deliverymen joking with each other, as his students do. He wonders if his teaching will impact their futures at all. Grant recalls the childhood peers and notes that some have left the community, some remain and some are dead.

Grant's teacher, a mulatto named Matthew Antoine, predicted that most of his students would die violently, or be "brought down to the level of beasts." Grant remembers that Antoine had contempt for himself and his students. After obtaining an education, Grant visits Antoine, but still sees the hatred in him. On one visit, Antoine tells Grant that he will come to feel the same, when he sees that his teaching is a waste. He reminds Grant that he told him to get out of the community.

Grant admits to himself that the two men were enemies, even though Grant says that he needed his teacher. Antoine justifies his decision to remain within the community by telling Grant that he is Creole, and defines Creole as being a "lying, cowardly bastard." He admits being afraid to leave and asks Grant where he might have gone, where he could have been looked on as superior to anyone. Antoine says that he is superior to any "man blacker than me." Grant asks if that is why Antoine hates him. Antoine says, "Exactly." Grant asks Antoine to tell him about life. Antoine replies "I can't tell you anything about life. What do I know about life? There's no life here. There's nothing but ignorance here. You want to know about life? Well, it's too late. Forget it. Just go on and be the nigger you were born to be, but forget about life."

Chapter 8 Analysis

The delivery of the first load of firewood to the school before the winter months causes Grant to wonder whether he is reaching his students, and to recall his odd relationship with Matthew Antoine. Although it is clear that Antoine saw potential in Grant as a student, there was contempt between them.

Antoine remained in the community, as he felt he could not go anywhere else and be viewed as superior to dark-skinned African Americans. This is a look at the deep prejudice that exists between light-skinned African Americans and dark skinned African Americans in the story's setting.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Grant leaves school at 1:30pm to take Miss Emma to see Jefferson. During the trip, Miss Emma is lost in her thoughts and does not talk. Grant describes the courthouse in Bayonne as having been built around the turn of the century, and looking like a small castle. A statue of a Confederate soldier is displayed in front of the building, as are the state, national and Confederate flags. Inside, Miss Emma's parcels are searched, before she and Grant are led to Jefferson's cell. Some of the other prisoners ask Miss Emma for money. Grant gives the prisoners change, and Miss Emma promises them whatever food Jefferson does not eat.

Jefferson is in a cell at the end of the cellblock, with one empty cell between his cell and the others. Grant and Miss Emma are locked in Jefferson's cell and permitted to stay for one hour. Jefferson lies on the cot, staring at the ceiling. Miss Emma tries to engage Jefferson in conversation and puts the parcels of food and clothing on the floor, before sitting on Jefferson's bunk. Miss Emma offers chicken to Jefferson. Jefferson says that it does not matter if he eats chicken or dirt, implying that since he is going to die soon, his diet is irrelevant.

As Miss Emma continues trying to entice Jefferson into eating, Jefferson asks Grant if he is with, "them," and if Grant is, "the one." He also asks if Grant is the one who will pull the switch. When Jefferson turns his head to stare at the ceiling, the guard returns. As he turns to the wall again, Miss Emma cries, "Oh, Lord Jesus. Oh, Lord Jesus, stand by, stand by."

Chapter 9 Analysis

Jefferson's demeanor is what might be expected of a young man who is about to be executed for a crime he did not commit. It is apparent why Sam Guidry might not want to allow anything to upset Jefferson. In his current state, Jefferson is unlikely to be any trouble at all for deputies. If Jefferson were to become angry or violent, he might realize that he has nothing to lose and become dangerous. Other prisoners might also be inflamed by his predicament and become dangerous. The jail and Jefferson's environment are compared to a fortress, through the description Grant provides. The Confederate flag and the statue of a Confederate soldier in front of the building show the location as a symbolic stronghold of Confederate philosophy, including racism.

As Grant and Jefferson move through the jail to Jefferson's cell, other prisoners ask them for money, which is a comparison to a dungeon scene. Grant and Miss Emma are shown to be generous with the prisoners, despite their own poverty. At the conclusion of the visit, Miss Emma is visibly upset by Jefferson's behavior, which is the first time she loses control over her emotions.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Although Miss Emma and Grant visit Jefferson twice, his behavior does not change; and Miss Emma leaves crying each time. On the day of the fourth visit, Grant goes to Tante Lou's house to pick up Miss Emma. Tante Lou tells him that Miss Emma is ill and that he will be going alone. Grant feels that Miss Emma is not ill, but that he is being manipulated into seeing Jefferson alone. Grant realizes that Miss Emma and Tante Lou had planned to get him to this point from the beginning. Angered by this revelation, Grant behaves rudely and launches into a tirade.

He tells the two women that they have humiliated him by forcing him to go to Henri Pichot, allowing the parcels to be searched at the jail and allowing himself to be searched at the jail. He theorizes that the guards at the jail may ask him to strip or look into his mouth. Grant reminds the women that they wanted him to escape this kind of humiliation through education; and he had been warned by his old teacher, Antoine, that he'd end up broken down like a, "nigger," even if he had not been warned that his own aunt would help do it.

Miss Emma begins to cry; however, Tante Lou apologizes to Grant for assisting white men to humiliate him. She says they have no one else to help them or Jefferson, as Grant leaves for the jail with parcels for Jefferson.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Grant's sense of anger at Tante Lou and Miss Emma for having been manipulated and humiliated is very apparent. His humiliation may be even greater because Miss Emma and Tante Lou are uneducated women, who were once servants to whites.

Tante Lou's iron will is as apparent as Grant's anger. She is unrelenting, and knows that she must play games with rules invented by others to get what she wants. It's likely she learned how to navigate difficult situations from being surrounded by racism her whole life. Her protective actions on behalf of Miss Emma also point to the value of their alliance. As a result, Miss Emma's challenges also belong to Tante Lou, who will risk Grant's wrath to protect her friend.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Sheriff Sam Guidry is in the jail's office when Grant arrives. As Grant's parcels are searched, Guidry reminds him that the visits will end at the first sign of trouble. Guidry asks Grant, "Still think you can get something into that head of his?" Grant says that he does not know.

Once locked in the cell, Grant tells Jefferson that Miss Emma could not come because of a cold, and notices yellow leaves and a patch of blue sky visible through the cell's barred window. Jefferson asks Grant if he has brought corn, because corn is what hogs eat. Grant tells Jefferson that he has no corn and that he is not a hog. He tells Jefferson to try the food to make Miss Emma happy, including home made candy. Jefferson says that hogs do not eat candy. Grant eats chicken and says that Miss Emma is a good cook.

The exchange between Grant and Jefferson continues, with Jefferson insisting that he is a hog and Grant continuing that he is human and cared about. Jefferson says that he will show Grant how hogs eat and shoves his face into the bag to eat with only his mouth. Grant admits mentally that Jefferson does indeed sound like a hog eating. Grant shows no emotion at this display and tells Jefferson that he plans to return home. He will lie to Miss Emma because she is sick, and the truth of Jefferson's recent actions would kill her. He informs Jefferson that he is going to tell Miss Emma that Jefferson ate and enjoyed her pralines. Grant asks Jefferson if he is trying to hurt him or if Jefferson does not want him to return to visit. He asks Jefferson if he wants the white men to, "win," and Grant to stay away. Jefferson reclines on the bunk, but does not respond. Grant does not call for the deputy because he does not want anyone to know that the visit is not going well. He stares out the window until the deputy returns.

Chapter 11 Analysis

During the first visit that Grant makes to the jail alone, Jefferson compares himself to a hog and eats like a hog to prove his point. It is possible that his refusal of the food is a struggle for control, as his food intake is one of the few things that he can easily control. He may also be making an attempt to cheat the executioner.

Grant is frustrated with Jefferson's behavior. Rather than call the guard early, he chooses to remain locked in Jefferson's jail cell, because he will never allow the white deputy to see a victory, no matter how small.

The lies that Grant plans to tell Miss Emma will spare her feelings, and indicate a depth of feeling, despite his frustration. Tante Lou and Miss Emma may anger Grant, but he will avoid hurting them.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

After leaving the jail, Grant thinks of how he can lie convincingly to Miss Emma. He goes to the Rainbow Club to think. At the club, Grant notices two men discussing baseball and Jackie Robinson with Joe Claiborne. He sees the pride they take in the accomplishments of athletes like Robinson and Joe Louis, and remembers how the African American community was depressed when Louis lost a fight to a German fighter named Schmeling.

Grant remembers an Irishman, who visited his university to lecture on Yeats, Joyce and O'Casey - authors Grant had never heard of until then. The Irish lecturer told the students how the Irish took great pride in the accomplishments of such authors as Parnell and Joyce. He also discusses Joyce's book, *Dubliners,* and a story in the book called "Ivy Day in the Committee Room," as universal tales. A teacher gives Grant an anthology, which includes "Ivy Day in the Committee Room." Although Grant reads the material, he cannot initially see why the story is something that reaches everyone, until he begins to listen closely to his peers discuss heroes.

Grant's thoughts bounce between Jefferson and Vivian. Grant decides to go and find Vivian at the school where she teaches, a few blocks away. He finds her in her classroom; but she tells him that she must see the principal before leaving. Grant cleans her blackboards, and replaces the French and English words with his own: "I love you...I love you...I love you," and "Je t'aime... Je t'aime... Je t'aime..." When Vivian returns, Grant asks her to spend the night with him. She says she cannot take the risk even though she would like to. Vivian tells Grant that she cannot give her husband, who is in Houston, a reason, such as adultery, to try to take her children away. She also does not know when her husband will return.

The couple agrees to meet at the Rainbow Club. Grant tells her about Jefferson's behavior, and how he feels compelled to lie to Miss Emma and Tante Lou. Vivian tells Grant that he is obligated to remain in his present circumstances, because his love for Tante Lou and Miss Emma is greater than his hatred for where and how he lives. Grant asks her if it is love or cowardice. Vivian reminds him again that he left and returned to the community before. Grant erases the blackboard. Vivian re-writes an expression of love on the board in French. Grants asks her what would happen if someone on the school's staff saw what she had written. She tells him that the teachers and students already know.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Grant's discomfort with lying to Miss Emma and Tante Lou regarding Jefferson's behavior is another indicator of his love for them. The emotional conflict and the stress

of seeing Jefferson's animalistic behavior lead him to Vivian for support and compassion.

That the couple is in love is clear; but even this relationship is problematic for Grant. Vivian's fear is that her husband might try to take her children if he can prove that she has engaged in adultery. She says she would go away with Grant if it were not for this. Vivian does not know when her husband will return, but admits that the staff at the school where she teaches knows about her relationship with Grant. This is a contradiction that forces Vivian to walk a tightrope. Some people around her are permitted to know of her relationship with Grant; but she cannot go too far, or she risks losing her children.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Grant is at his aunt's home as he hears Eloise Bouie calling Tante Lou from the road. A church bell is heard in the distance, and Grant chats with Eloise. As the women go to church, Grant corrects papers. The third Sunday of each month is Determination Sunday: a church service where parishioners sing their favorite hymns, share plans about how determined they are to get to heaven and say what they will do to ensure their admittance into heaven.

Grant recalls how Miss Emma, Tante Lou and the Reverend Ambrose were waiting for him in Tante Lou's kitchen to return on Friday night. Grant lies to them, as he had planned. He says that Jefferson was all right, conversed and ate the food. He tries to remain vague, but the women and the Reverend press for details. Reverend Ambrose asks Grant what he believes Jefferson is thinking and feeling; but Grant says that he cannot know. The Reverend notes that Jefferson did not remain religious following his baptism at the age of eleven or twelve, and adds that Grant has not either. He asks Grant if he has discussed God with Jefferson. Grant encourages the Reverend to see Jefferson and discuss God himself. The Reverend says that he plans to see Jefferson with Miss Emma and Tante Lou on Monday, asking if there is anything he should take to Jefferson. Grant suggests taking food and clothing. The Reverend asks if Grant thinks a Bible would be appropriate, and Grant agrees it would.

As Grant continues correcting papers that Sunday, he thinks about how he had less time to worship. He thinks about how he cared less about church, as his education progressed. He knows this change caused Tante Lou pain. He remembers how he thought of leaving, as his teacher, Antoine, suggested. Grant's parents had invited him to visit them in California; but he knows that Tante Lou was happy to see him return to the community. He thinks of how unhappy his life is, and how equally unhappy he is with the options that exist for change. Grant's thoughts are interrupted by the arrival of a surprise visitor.

Chapter 13 Analysis

As Grant corrects his students' papers on Sunday morning, hymnal music from the church distracts him. He thinks about his feelings over how he was compelled to lie, in order to spare Miss Emma's feelings. It also seems that Grant's lies are in danger of being exposed, as Tante Lou, Miss Emma and the Reverend plan to see Jefferson on Monday. This planned visit does not cause Grant to present the truth to Miss Emma or Tante Lou.

During the conversation that Grant has with Tante Lou on Friday evening, Tante Lou accuses Grant of spending the whole afternoon with his girlfriend and of not going to

see Jefferson at all. Grant does not respond angrily to this accusation because he already feels guilty. His aunt has guessed that he is being dishonest, but she does not know how.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Vivian's arrival surprises and pleases Grant. Her children are with a sitter. Grant asks her why she has decided to visit, and Vivian replies that she just wanted to see him. Grant apologizes for the shabbiness of the home, but to Vivian it is rustic and pastoral. They move into the kitchen and share coffee and cake. Vivian notes the peace of Grant's home; but Grant says Sunday is a sad day. Vivian suggests that Grant attend church to pass the time. She says she knows that he believes, even though he may not want to. After they are done eating, Vivian insists that they wash the dishes; as leaving them would not be fair to Tante Lou. When they finish, Vivian agrees to a walk.

Although Vivian and Grant can hear Reverend Ambrose singing, the neighborhood is very quiet; as most people are indoors or in church. They reach a pecan tree, where Vivian asks if Grant wants her to be there. He tells her that he does, and that he loves her very much. Grant tells her that he hopes she loves him half as much as he loves her. The couple moves further toward the cane, where they make love.

Afterward, Vivian states that she thinks something has happened, and says that she feels strange. Grant and Vivian discuss names for children, in a playful manner, and snuggle as the chapter closes.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Vivian's arrival pulls Grant away from his melancholy thoughts and academic chores. The visit indicates her desire to become a larger part of his life. Her acceptance of his home and neighborhood is also an indication of her growing love for him. During this visit, Vivian tries on Grant's environment, to see if she fits; and she seems to.

When Grant and Vivian make love in the cane field, they discuss the possibility of children for the first time. They suggestnames and wonder about twins. It is a new link between them, even though the conversation is not serious. From this brief conversation, Vivian knows that a pregnancy would not end their relationship.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Vivian and Grant begin walking back to Tante Lou's home. Grant tells Vivian that he will see Jefferson again on Friday. Vivian asks if Grant knows when Jefferson will be executed; but Grant tells her that this is to be decided by "the big boss in Baton Rouge." Nearing Tante Lou's home, Vivian asks if Grant would prefer that she leave before his aunt returns home. He tells her to stay, and that he already told his aunt the previous Friday night that he was with Vivian. Vivian says that she hopes Tante Lou will like her. Grant reassures her; and Vivian says that she wishes she could, "say the same for them in Free LaCove."

Vivian is from Free LaCove, but is not well liked there. While attending Xavier University in New Orleans, she met and married a dark-skinned African American man, but did not tell her family about the marriage. She knew they would disapprove because her husband had darker skin than she. Following the wedding, Vivian, her husband and her children were shunned, and still are.

Grant and Vivian watch Tante Lou, Miss Emma, Inez and Eloise approach the home. Grant introduces Vivian in the kitchen. He has a brief disagreement with his aunt over coffee, and informs the women that he plans to marry Vivian. Tante Lou tells Vivian that she knows she is from Free LaCove, and that she has heard that dark skinned African Americans are not well liked there. Vivian says that not all residents of the town share the prejudice. Tante Lou questions Vivian on her religion, pointing out that Grant is not religious. Vivian says that she and Grant will resolve their religious differences in the future.

Grant tells Vivian to serve cake and coffee to the other ladies, which she does before exiting with Grant to the porch. When she goes to the kitchen to say goodbye, the ladies tell her that they think she is a "lady of quality." As she leaves, Vivian asks Grant if he thinks she has passed inspection; and he says that she has.

Chapter 15 Analysis

Vivian appears to be walking through a minefield when she meets the other women in Grant's life, but meets with their approval. Grant's announcement that he will marry Vivian one day is a surprise to his female relatives, but perhaps not to Vivian.

Once again, prejudice that exists between darker skinned African Americans and those with lighter skin is shown, through Vivian's history. This form of racism is strong enough to cause Vivian's family to shun her, and her children, even after she has separated from the man she originally married. This kind of racism between African Americans was also evident in Grant's relationship with his former teacher, Antoine.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

On Monday afternoon, Grant sees Tante Lou, Miss Emma and Reverend Ambrose from the school, as they return from seeing Jefferson. His students are planning a Christmas program, but he dismisses them early. After the students leave, Grant is summoned to Miss Emma.

Grant finds Miss Emma at the kitchen table, with Reverend Ambrose and Tante Lou. Miss Emma tells Grant that she knows he lied to her because she hit Jefferson during her visit. Jefferson was asleep when his visitors arrived. Miss Emma pushed Jefferson a little to the side so that she could sit down, and tried to talk with him. Jefferson ignored her. Miss Emma tried to entice Jefferson to eat, but he asked her if she has corn with her or roast nyers. ??? When Jefferson says he is a hog being fattened for the coming holiday, Miss Emma slaps him. Grant actually learns this eavesdropping on a conversation that Tante Lou has with Eloise a couple of days later.

At the kitchen table, Miss Emma turns to Tante Lou and asks her what she has done to God to deserve such pain. Tante Lou reassures Miss Emma that God is merciful, and tells her to try to be patient. Miss Emma asks Tante Lou why God hates her. Reverend Ambrose intervenes to tell Miss Emma that the Lord is testing her, but does not hate her. Miss Emma insists that Grant return to the jail.

Chapter 16 Analysis

Grant's lies are exposed because Jefferson's behavior has not changed. Although Grant undoubtedly knew this would happen, he allowed the Reverend, Miss Emma and Tante Lou to go to the jail believing the falsehoods, because he did not want to hurt his aunt or Jefferson's godmother.

Up until this point, Miss Emma has said that Grant does not have to visit Jefferson, and Tante Lou was the character requiring Grant to go to the jail. Miss Emma now demands that Grant return to see Jefferson, with no pretense of giving him a choice. She has seen Jefferson talking about being a hog; and the situation has now become dire in her eyes, because the words of the defense attorney are coming true. If Jefferson behaves as a man and dies with dignity, Miss Emma will survive. Jefferson's dehumanization is worse than death to Miss Emma.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

Between Grant's conversation with Miss Emma on Monday and his Friday visit with Jefferson, he says that he has left some of his anger behind. Grant theorizes that the Christmas season may play a part in this, but also says that he could never stay angry for long.

Grant goes through the usual process at the jail before he can see Jefferson. He talks with a deputy, named Paul Bonin, who is more amiable than other jail personnel. Bonin reports that the other prisoners are curious about the execution; but as he has no experience, he has little to tell them. Bonin says that Jefferson never discusses the execution. Bonin tells Grant that he does not plan to get close to Jefferson. He will treat Jefferson decently, but says that he will always do his duty. Grant tells Bonin that he feels "the same way." Grant also learns that Jefferson is permitted an hour of exercise and a shower once a week. Bonin says that another prisoner gives Jefferson a haircut. A barber would be assigned to shave him; but Jefferson does not have a beard, which attests to his youth. Bonin also reports that Jefferson does not speak with other prisoners.

Jefferson is seated on his bunk in the cell and exchanges comments with Grant. Grant notes that Jefferson looks like he has been crying. He asks Jefferson to make things easier for Miss Emma. Jefferson says that Grant is asking this of him because he is going to die anyway. When Grant tells Jefferson that everyone dies, Jefferson asks if Grant expects to die tomorrow or in the coming week. Grant points out that no one knows when they will die. This is why he tries to avoid hurting other people, particularly those who have sacrificed for him.

Jefferson says that Grant is annoying him and threatens to say mean things about "that old yellow woman you go with." Grant tells Jefferson that it is Vivian who keeps him coming to the jail, and that he can say whatever he likes. Jefferson threatens to scream, but Grant tells him to go ahead. Grant notes that Jefferson is angry, but not foolish enough to think he does not need Grant.

"Her old pussy ain't no good," says Jefferson, referring to Vivian. Grant maintains his self-control and reminds Jefferson that Vivian is the reason that he has continued to come to the jail, which makes Jefferson cry. Jefferson tells Grant that manners and food are for the living, and swings the bag of food so that food is splattered all over the cell. Grant cleans up the food before Bonin returns to unlock the cell door.

Grant tells Bonin that the visit went all right, and is in turn told that Guidry wants to see him. In Guidry's office, Grant finds the chief deputy and the unknown fat man, who was at Henri Pichot's home when he went there for the second time. Guidry questions Grant, who admits that he is not making much progress with Jefferson.

Grant learns that Miss Emma, Tante Lou and Reverend Ambrose have approached Edna Guidry, asking her to talk with her husband to see if they can meet with Jefferson in the day room, or another more comfortable area, so they can all sit down during visits. Edna confesses that she will be happy when, "all of this is over," causing Miss Edna to drop her coffee cup. Edna apologizes and agrees to talk with Sam. Guidry thinks this request is another waste of time, but says that he will leave the decision with Jefferson. If Jefferson wants to see visitors in the day room, in shackles, Guidry will allow it.

Chapter 17 Analysis

Paul Bonin appears as a second white male who seems to lack the mean nature of some of the other characters, even though he is all business. He is honest with Grant; but his statement that he will do his duty puts him clearly in an authoritarian role.

Jefferson remains antagonistic, although he speaks more during this visit. Grant displays restraint when he insults Vivian. This is an aspect of the teacher's personality that has appeared in situations involving Miss Emma and Tante Lou.

Tante Lou, Miss Emma and the Reverend Ambrose may have avoided pulling Grant into their request for a more comfortable place to meet, because he was successful in arranging meetings with Jefferson, and they may not have wanted to ask for more. Not being informed places Grant in an awkward position with Guidry, as it appears that he is not important enough to be informed of the group's desires. Guidry handles the request by saying that he will ask Jefferson what he wants, but may expect Jefferson to simply say he does not care. This could allow Guidry to once again assert that Jefferson is less than a man, as a hog would not care where it met with anyone.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

Jefferson tells Sam Guidry that he will meet with Tante Lou, Miss Emma and Reverend Ambrose in the jail's day room, if that is what they want. The next visit includes Grant, Reverend Ambrose, Tante Lou and Miss Emma. In the day room, the women prepare a small table with place settings and food. Jefferson is brought to the day room in chains. Miss Emma tries to engage Jefferson in conversation and tries to feed him, but her efforts are not successful.

Grant returns to the jail alone a couple of days later. In the day room, Grant eats after offering some to Jefferson. Jefferson says that he wants to talk about the execution, but Grant talks about his school's Christmas program. Jefferson asks if Christmas is when Christ was born, or died. Grant tells him that it is Christ's birth that is celebrated on Christmas. Jefferson says that he recalls that Easter is when Christ was nailed to a cross. Grant tries to convince Jefferson that he has a responsibility to try to be kinder to Miss Emma. Jefferson replies that she should not visit him in jail and insists that he is a hog being fattened before Christmas, adding, "I be glad when it's over. Old hog get him some rest then."

After the visit, Grant goes to the Rainbow Club to wait for Vivian. Although Vivian and Grant had planned to go to a friend's home in Baton Rouge that night, Grant cancels the plan, as he finds sex to be unsatisfactory after seeing Jefferson. They discuss their Christmas programs and Grant tells Vivian again that he will leave town with her immediately if she wishes. Vivian says that they will hate each other if they do. Grant tells her that he is not doing Jefferson any good; but she insists that he is.

Chapter 18 Analysis

Guidry keeps his word, demonstrating honesty and reliability. In this, similarities between Grant's behavior and Sam Guidry's are seen. Jefferson's behavior continues to be that of someone who views himself as already dead, or beneath human behavior. This is despite the fact that Grant, Tante Lou, Miss Emma and Reverend Ambrose refuse to desert him. Their creation of a nice place for Jefferson to eat is an effort to elevate him to a level where they can relate to him, and to increase his self esteem. Jefferson persists in his behaviors, because he is making it easier for his family members to disconnect from him after he is dead. He is also distancing himself from his own emotions. It is for this reason that Grant's efforts to persuade Jefferson to display kindness in Miss Emma's presence show few results. If Jefferson shows kindness, he will have no choice but to feel other emotions that threaten to overwhelm him.

Vivian tells Grant that he is, in fact, achieving something with Jefferson. She may not know what this is, and the statement may be more a reflection of her faith than fact.

Vivian must believe that Grant's visits to the jail are important because they cause him such pain. She must believe that there is a reason for them to continue, for Grant's sake or Jefferson's.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

The weather turns cold and rainy, as Grant's Christmas program at the school approaches. As Grant has dedicated the school's Christmas program to Jefferson, it is well attended, despite the poor weather. Grant is assisted in his preparation of the students before the performance by two older students. They work behind a curtain made of sheets in the classroom. Children, dressed as members of the Holy Family or wearing choir robes, perform songs, read a poem and act out the story of the birth of Christ.

At seven o'clock Grant steps from behind the curtain to welcome everyone to the performance. He invites Reverend Ambrose to speak. The Reverend opens with the Lord's Prayer and thanks God for the new day. He also asks God to visit the sick, and those who are in jails, as well as those in the audience. The Reverend asks God to forgive those who have sinned and those who do not believe in him, which Grant takes personally. The Reverend closes by asking God's blessing on the church and those who have come to the performance.

The children sing several well-known Christmas songs, read a poem and perform a re-telling of Christ's birth. A lone present sits beneath the tree in the classroom. The present is a wool sweater and a pair of socks that have been paid for by contributions from the children. As the children's performance ends, Grant asks the Reverend Ambrose to speak again. The Reverend thanks God for all the people who have come to see the performance, and reminds the audience that those who do not keep God in their hearts are not saved from sin. Grant interprets this remark as being directed at him, but says nothing. Grant thanks the Reverend and invites audience members to enjoy the refreshments in the back of the room. Grant's student, Irene, notes that he does not look happy after the performance; but he tells her that he is all right.

Chapter 19 Analysis

The Christmas program at Grant's school is extremely well attended, despite inclement weather, because people seem to be hungry for the spiritual fulfillment of celebrating the holiday and watching the children perform. The Reverend's comments appear to be directed Grant, as much as they are at audience members, as the Reverend points out that even the educated cannot attain fulfillment without God. It is a point that seems to make Grant feel guilty.

The lone present appears to be for Jefferson, although that is not clearly stated in the chapter. It is a symbol of the strength of feeling that Jefferson's plight evokes in the close-knit community.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

Approximately two months have passed since the school's Christmas program. It is now February. Grant is correcting his students' math papers, when Farrell Jarreau comes to the school to tell him that a date has been set for Jefferson's execution. Farrell informs Grant that he is to go to Henri Pichot's home immediately. Reverend Ambrose is also to be present. Grant leaves after putting his student, Irene, in charge of the class.

Grant meets Reverend Ambrose in Pichot's kitchen. When Sam Guidry arrives, Grant is taken to the front of the home for the first time. Grant notes that Pichot seems nervous. Guidry announces that the governor has set the execution date for the second Friday following Easter. Guidry says that he has told Jefferson, and he seems to understand. The sheriff warns Grant that he does not want trouble. Guidry says that his wife, Edna, thinks that Miss Emma might need a doctor when she is told of the execution date. He says that he will send Dr. Gillory after he gets back to the town.

Grant asks Guidry why this particular date has been chosen. Guidry explaines the execution could not have been scheduled during Lent. Grant later learns from a deputy that the governor had chosen a date before Ash Wednesday; but an aide said that another execution was set for the same time. Catholics in the state might object to two occurring just before Lent.

Guidry says that Grant's visits can continue and notes that Jefferson has about one month to live, as the date will be April 8th. Jefferson will be put to death between noon and 3:00pm. Reverend Ambrose reminds the doctor to send the physician, noting that Miss Emma has not been very well. The sheriff calls the doctor on a phone. As Guidry exchanges pleasantries with the doctor, Grant thinks how Jefferson's execution will be similar to Christ's crucifixion. Both happen on a Friday, between the hours of noon and 3:00pm. Guidry ends his conversation, saying that Dr. Gillory is on his way, and leaves.

Reverend Ambrose offers Grant a ride, but Grant refuses, saying that he is not going to tell Miss Emma that Jefferson is going to be killed on April 8th. The Reverend tells him that he would have the strength if he believed in God. Grant replies that God is his responsibility, and that he is going for a long walk. Grant does not return to the quarter until later that evening. He thinks that Miss Emma has been told of the execution date by this time.

Chapter 20 Analysis

Although months have passed, and Jefferson's execution may have seemed distant to Grant and others, the scheduled dateagain brings hard reality into focus for Grant. His visit to the front section of Pichot's house, for the first time, to receive this news sets the stage for the impact of the scheduled execution date.

Grant is filled with renewed anger, as he notes the similarities between Christ's death and the upcoming death of Jefferson. Jefferson emerges as a symbol of condemned innocence, much the way Christ is viewed. It is a powerful representation of injustice that is brought forward as a result of extreme racism.

Guidry's continued warnings that he wants no trouble clearly show his racist nature, as well as a growing fear. Edna Guidry's influence continues to be felt, in her suggestions that a doctor be in attendance when Miss Emma is given the news of Jefferson's execution date. Edna is Guidry's single weakness, as she successfully manipulates him in a similar way to how Grant is manipulated by Tante Lou, Vivian and Miss Emma.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

As Grant approaches Miss Emma's home that evening, he sees Reverend Ambrose's car parked there. Inside the home, Inez directs Grant to Miss Emma, who is lying on a bed. Grant asks her how she is, but Miss Emma does not answer. He knows that she has heard him, because the edges of her mouth move slightly. Grant leaves Miss Emma's bedside and goes to the kitchen, where Tante Lou is making coffee. Reverend Ambrose is at the table and gives Grant a dirty look. Grant looks away to speak to his student, Irene, who offers him coffee. Tante Lou tells Grant that his food is on the stove at her home, but seems displeased with him.

Grant leaves Miss Emma's home to go to Tante Lou's home. He warms the food and lights a fire in his aunt's room, so it will be warm when she returns. As he finishes eating, Vivian arrives. They discuss Jefferson's execution date. Vivian says that she wants to see Miss Emma, but is unsure if she should go to the house. She wants to be liked by Grant's family; but Grant tells her that it will not matter if they like her or not.

At Miss Emma's home, Grant and Vivian approach Miss Emma's bed together. Vivian leans in to whisper something. Although Miss Emma does not speak, Grant senses that she is pleased by what Vivian has said. They leave Miss Emma and head for the kitchen, where Tante Lou is making more coffee. Vivian is also introduced to Irene Cole, Grant's student. Grant and Vivian walk into the front room of the house. Inez comes for Grant to tell him that Miss Emma wants to talk with him. Miss Emma tells Grant that things are in his hands and hopes he will work with the Reverend. Grant tells Miss Emma that he will try, before going to find Vivian with a student at the door of the kitchen.

When Vivian and Grant leave, he tells Vivian that he wants a drink, suggesting they go to town. They leave in separate cars for the Rainbow Club. At the club, Vivian asks Grant if he is aware that his student, Irene Cole, is in love with him. Grant tells Vivian that a lot of women are in love with him; but they all want to keep him here because they have very little.

Vivian says that she told Miss Emma she was praying for Jefferson and her, but returns to the subject of Irene Cole. Grant tells her that Irene and Tante Lou want the same thing from him that Miss Emma wants from Jefferson, adding that he is unsure if Miss Emma ever had anyone she could be proud of. If Jefferson dies with dignity, Miss Emma can be proud of him. She wants something positive to remember. Grant says that both Irene and Tante Lou know he will leave them, and that they will not willingly allow him to go. He compares this to Miss Emma's need for a memory. Grant tells Vivian that Miss Emma told him that she hopes he will work with Reverend Ambrose, and asks if Vivian understands. She does not.

Grant says that African American men have not protected African American women since slavery. He says that when a male child is born, African American women hope that he will break the cycle. Grant says this never happens because that would be too large a burden. To save themselves, Grant says that African American men run. He says that Miss Emma wants him to change this with Jefferson, so that she can feel proud. Grant says that if Jefferson crawls to the electric chair, Miss Emma will never have another chance to "see a black man stand for her." He compares Irene and Tante Lou to Miss Emma, saying their motivation is the same. He notes that Tante Lou never married and has no one else. Miss Emma raised Grant's mother because her sister left Grant's mother with Tante Lou, so she could move away with a man. Grant also notes that his parents left the quarter and left him with Tante Lou. Grant says that Irene and her peers look at the African American men in their lives and see broken men. He thinks that he is respected by Irene and the students because he is a teacher, who can provide something that their other male role models cannot. Grant points out that those who clutch at him too tightly could break him.

Chapter 21 Analysis

At Miss Emma's house, Grant senses that his aunt and Reverend Ambrose are displeased; but his walk and Vivian's presence have given him strength. He sees Miss Emma to fulfill an obligation. The atmosphere is the house is almost like a wake. Visitors are mourning, as if Jefferson were already dead.

Vivian's presence is a further indication that she is becoming part of Grant's family, whether they are married or not. Grant presents a pessimistic view of African American manhood. By comparing the needs of his student, his aunt and Miss Emma, he clarifies their need for something to feel proud of. Grant also pinpoints why Miss Emma's need for Jefferson to die with dignity is of paramount importance. If Jefferson is killed like an animal, the local white authorities will have won a victory by destroying Jefferson's spirit. If Jefferson dies with dignity, Miss Emma and the other female characters can remember Jefferson as having displayed strength, which will make him a hero.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

As the chapter opens, Grant is back at the jail, being searched again by Deputy Paul Bonin. Bonin tells Grant that he is Jefferson's first visitor since being told when his execution will be. As Grant moves past the other prisoners, they do not ask for money or food this time. In the cell, Jefferson notes that what he can see of the weather, through the bars on the window, seems nice. Grant asks Jefferson if he wants anything. Jefferson says that he wants a gallon of ice cream because he never had enough ice cream growing up. Grant offers to bring him a radio and Jefferson accepts. Grant wishes he could go buy a radio right then, but does not have money with him. The hour ends and Paul Bonin asks Grant how the visit went. Grant admits that the time was the best he has had with Jefferson thus far. When Grant asks Bonin about the radio, the deputy says that it will be allowed.

Grant leaves the jail to go to the Rainbow Club. He plans to wait for Vivian so he can borrow the money for a radio from her and take it to the jail, but he gets the money from Thelma and Joe Claiborne. In Edwin's store, Grant annoys a white clerk by insisting on a brand new radio. Grant returns to the jail, where he is greeted by Deputy Paul Bonin and Sam Guidry. Guidry informs him that the radio will be given to Jefferson, but he must ask Guidry himself about bringing anything else to the jail in the future. Grant leaves the radio and returns to the Rainbow Club, hoping Vivian will be there.

Chapter 22 Analysis

As Grant moves through the jail, Jefferson's fellow prisoners do not approach him for money or food, which is a departure from their behavior in past chapters. The announcement of an execution date for Jefferson has changed both Grant's and Jefferson's status. Now, both men are very unlike other visitors or prisoners. The change in the behavior of Jefferson's fellow prisoners highlights how the status of the men has changed.

A positive change has also taken place in Jefferson's demeanor, as Grant finds him able and willing to converse. Jefferson knows the date of his execution and seems relieved. Being imprisoned may be a living death for the young man, who sees death as an escape. As such, Jefferson asks for ice cream and accepts a radio, things he has a limited time to enjoy.

Guidry is present at the jail to reassert his authority. Paul Bonin is a contrast to Guidry because Grant senses that he is pleased about the change in Jefferson's behavior and the radio. Bonin may have incurred Guidry's wrath for telling Grant that he could bring it; but that did not stop him from behaving morally.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary

Miss Emma, Tante Lou and Reverend Ambrose visit Jefferson in the day room. Initially Jefferson refuses to go to the day room, when he is told he cannot take the radio with him. When Bonin tells them about Jefferson's reluctance to leave his cell because of the radio, they see him in his cell. When Bonin returns to the cell, he tells the visitors that Sheriff Guidry wants to see them.

In the office, Guidry offers to have the radio removed; but Miss Emma says that there are no problems. Guidry asks why Miss Emma and her companions did not mind standing in Jefferson's cell today, when they minded enough in the past to seek his wife's intervention. Miss Emma does not really reply.

Guidry points out that Jefferson has little time left to live, and again says that he does not want any trouble. He adds that Miss Emma, Tante Lou and Reverend Ambrose have to work together with Grant. Guidry asks the Reverend how he is helping Jefferson's soul, but the Reverend does not answer.

Grant is in his classroom when he is summoned to Miss Emma's house by one of his students. Tante Lou, Miss Emma and the Reverend are angry with Grant for giving Jefferson a radio because they feel that it is a negative distraction. Reverend Ambrose tells Grant that Jefferson has five weeks to live and needs God more than he needs a radio, which he calls, "a sin box."

Grant says that the radio is a positive thing for Jefferson and that he does not care what anyone thinks about it. He says that he was able to reach Jefferson for the first time and that Jefferson deserves to have something he enjoys before he dies. Tante Lou argues with Grant, but he reminds everyone that the visits were their idea. The Reverend questions whether Grant is reaching Jefferson as much as he thinks he is; but Grant leaves without answering.

The next day, Grant takes pecans and roasted peanuts from his students to the jail, along with apples, candy and comic books. Grant asks Jefferson to meet with his visitors in the day room for Miss Emma's sake, to which Jefferson agrees. He also offers to bring Jefferson a notebook so that he can write things down that he wants to talk with Grant about. Jefferson accepts this idea.

Chapter 23 Analysis

Tante Lou, Reverend Ambrose and Miss Emma seem selfish in this chapter because they are angry with Grant for providing Jefferson with something that brings him pleasure. Although they have pushed Grant into seeing Jefferson, they are unhappy with how the plan is turning out, and are angry at their lack of control. Their behavior

highlights the impact of religion throughout the story. In their eyes, Jefferson is snubbing God, in the form of Reverend Ambrose, in favor of the sinful activity of listening to popular music.

Grant is clearly a much stronger advocate for Jefferson than he has been in the past. Jefferson's behavior, which is less erratic, makes it easier for Grant to want to help him. His defiance with Reverend Ambrose, Tante Lou and Miss Emma is evidence that he will be a more powerful champion for Jefferson in the future.

Guidry's behavior has also changed. Where he was once very much against the idea of Grant seeing Jefferson, he tells Miss Emma, Tante Lou and Reverend Ambrose that they must work with Grant. This is a clear indicator that he is well aware of what is happening with Jefferson's behavior.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24 Summary

Miss Emma decides that Grant should go with her, Reverend Ambrose and Tante Lou when they see Jefferson again. Grant is late in arriving, but offers no explanations for his tardiness. In the day room, Miss Emma and Tante Lou set the table to serve gumbo. Jefferson arrives and Grant begins eating before Reverend Ambrose has said a prayer. He stops eating when he realizes his mistake. Grant tells Jefferson that he has brought the notebook and pencil, and asks if Jefferson wants to walk, after eating. As they walk, Tante Lou, Miss Emma and Reverend Ambrose remain at the table. Grant tells Jefferson that he wants him to try to be a friend to Miss Emma, and more than a godson. Grant also encourages Jefferson to eat some gumbo, which Jefferson agrees to try. He tells Jefferson that he could never be a hero because he wants to run away to live for himself. He encourages Jefferson to be a hero to Miss Emma, the children of the quarter and to him.

Grant says that white people have said that Jefferson is a hog, but Grant knows whites are always looking for scapegoats. Grant says that he wants Jefferson to show them that he can be more than they expect and prove them wrong. Grant continues urging Jefferson to behave with dignity and courage to make liars of white bigots. Grant concludes by asking Jefferson to eat gumbo at the table.

Chapter 24 Analysis

Jefferson's presence in the day room, without his radio, is indicative that he is making an effort to please Miss Emma and his other supporters. It is a sign of his renewed cooperation with Grant. Grant's discussion with Jefferson, as they walk around the day room, is a plea for Jefferson to step outside of his circumstances and an invitation to assume a heroic role before he is put to death. Grant's assertion, that Jefferson can become a positive symbol for the African Americans in the community, elevates Jefferson to the level of a hero for those who may not have heroes..

Chapter 25

Chapter 25 Summary

Grant is exceptionally pleased with how this visit with Jefferson has gone, and goes to the Rainbow Club looking for Vivian to share his good news. Grant suspects that Reverend Ambrose is jealous of Grant's improved relationship with Jefferson and his influence with the young man, but he vows not to tell Vivian about it.

Joe Claiborne serves Grant a drink as he waits for Vivian. Grant notices a group of mulatto bricklayers talking in the corner of the bar, but does not pay them much attention. He thinks about how his involvement with Jefferson has negatively affected his sexual performance with Vivian, and hopes this will improve now that he is feeling better. As Grant sips a second drink, he notes that the bricklayers appear angry. Mulattos are so prejudiced against African Americans who have darker skin than they do, that many drop out of school to enter the bricklaying trade. That way they do not have to work with dark-skinned African Americans or be in classrooms with dark-skinned African Americans.

Grant becomes aware that the bricklayers are discussing Jefferson. One says that Jefferson has made life difficult for all African Americans and that he would execute Jefferson himself if that were possible. Grant realizes he should leave the bar, but is unable to go. Grant approaches the bricklayers and tells them to, "shut up." A fight breaks out. Joe and Thelma Claiborne try to break it up. Joe Claiborne yells that someone must go find Vivian. Grant is knocked unconscious. When he regains consciousness, Vivian is helping him to his feet to get him out of the bar.

Chapter 25 Analysis

When Grant arrives at the Rainbow Club, he is jubilant because of the progress he seems to be making with Jefferson. Jefferson's new demeanor gives Grant purpose and alleviates his helplessness. Again, the deep prejudice that exists in the story between light-skinned African Americans and those with darker skin is seen. The depth of this racism acts as a catalyst for the fight that breaks out.

Grant's physical altercation is indicative of the depth of his feelings for Jefferson and his plight. The teacher would not normally be seen as someone who is prone to physical aggression, but behavior of the mulatto bricklayers is an enormous betrayal of their race and of Jefferson.

Chapter 26

Chapter 26 Summary

Vivian takes Grant to her home and tells Grant that Joe Claiborne knocked him unconscious with his gun, because Grant would not stop the fight. She also tells Grant that she is disgusted by his behavior and says that he will stay the night at her home, while the babysitter keeps her children. Grant protests because he feels that he will harm her reputation if he stays. When Grant asks about how this could affect Vivian's job and husband, she tells him that she could lose her job and her husband could take her children. However she already has trouble because of being summoned from her school to the bar.

Grant continues trying to appease Vivian. As Vivian prepares food, she tells Grant that her husband, who is in Texas, has told her that he will not give her a divorce unless he can see the children each weekend. Grant asks if her husband knows about their relationship. Vivian thinks that he does. They continue to argue. Grant tries to leave but finds that he is unable to leave Vivian.

Chapter 26 Analysis

Grant's happiness is a result of his progress with Jefferson and his new ability to show that he is more effective with Jefferson than Reverend Ambrose. Realizing that this may be petty, Grant decides not to tell Vivian about the Reverend's envy. Grant is refusing to engage in the small-minded behavior that his Tante Lou, Miss Emma and Reverend Ambrose have, and he sets himself apart from them.

Vivian's intervention at the bar is a rescue. The fight, fueled by hate and alcohol, might have turned as deadly as the situation that has put Jefferson in jail. This scene shows how easily an African American male can become involved in deadly violence in the story's setting.

Vivian's disgust for Grant indicates that she would have expected him to rise above the situation and leave the bar. She is also upset that Grant's actions could cost her a job and her children. As such, she views his acts as selfish.

Chapter 27

Chapter 27 Summary

It is now Sunday. Grant is lying on his bed when Tante Lou asks him to talk with Reverend Ambrose. Grant agrees and the Reverend is shown to Grant's room. Reverend Ambrose tells Grant that Jefferson has about three weeks left to live and says, "He ain't saved." Grant says he can do nothing about this; but Reverend Ambrose tells Grant that he can, because he can influence Jefferson. Grant points out that it is the Reverend's responsibility to bring God to Jefferson. Reverend Ambrose informs Grant that he will return to Jefferson with Miss Emma and plans to talk about God. Grant affirms this is good. The Reverend asks Grant if he believes in God. Grant says that he does not believe in an afterlife, but does believe in God.

Grant says that he is doing the best he can, and the rest is up to the Reverend. The Reverend says that Grant has not learned anything about his own people, himself or Miss Emma, and that he is more educated than Grant. He also tells Grant that he will not allow Grant to send Jefferson to hell, and will fight him for Jefferson's soul.

Grant asks if the Reverend wants him to stop seeing Jefferson. Reverend Ambrose tells Grant that he will continue seeing Jefferson, because they both owe Miss Emma that. The Reverend predicts that Miss Emma will die soon after Jefferson. He wants Miss Emma to believe that Jefferson will be in heaven when she gets there. The Reverend says that Grant must tell Jefferson to fall on his knees before he is executed and to fall on his knees before Miss Emma. Grant says that he will never tell Jefferson not to believe, but hopes that Jefferson does not ask about Grant's beliefs, because he could not lie.

Reverend Ambrose tells Grant that if Jefferson asks, Grant should lie.

Chapter 27 Analysis

Grant's relationships with God and the Reverend Ambrose appear strained. Throughout Grant's acrimonious conversation with the Reverend, Grant's belief in God is shown; but his lack of belief in an afterlife is a contradiction. As Grant has witnessed suffering and hardship in his life, his belief in a benevolent higher power is frayed. He seems confused about what he really thinks about these concepts.

The Reverend Ambrose makes a concession to Grant when he admits that Grant has more influence with Jefferson. He admits having little respect for Grant, because his education has not encouraged self-awareness or an awareness of the people around him. Reverend Ambrose's admission that he lies to give comfort is also an admission that he himself harbors doubts about God.

Chapter 28

Chapter 28 Summary

When Grant returns to see Jefferson, he takes baked sweet potatoes. It is the day before Good Friday. Grant sees the radio in use and the notebook and pencil on the cell floor. Jefferson allows Grant to see the notebook, where he has recorded a dream about his execution. In the journal, Jefferson questions why he is not to be stabbed or knocked unconscious like a hog.

Grant suggests that Jefferson should speak to Christ, and that it would be good for Miss Emma to know that he does. Jefferson asks if Grant thinks that Alcee Grope, Brother or Bear went to heaven. Grant says that he does not know. Jefferson asks what he should pray for then. Grant suggests that he should pray for Miss Emma; but Jefferson says that Miss Emma needs no help getting to heaven. Jefferson asks Grant if he prays. Grant admits that he does not, but says that he is lost for that reason. Jefferson says that Reverend Ambrose has told him to give up what is of the earth. Grant explains that he is referring to material possessions; but Jefferson talks about his poverty, asking what he should give up.

Grant points out that all that Jefferson is being asked for are actions to help Miss Emma feel better when he is gone. Grant explains that Miss Emma is ill and wants Jefferson to meet her in heaven. Jefferson says that Grant is asking a lot. Grant says that Miss Emma would do this for Jefferson, but Jefferson replies that he must die alone. He asks Grant if God will accompany him, which leads him to ask if Grant believes in God. Grant says that he thinks God is the reason people care for others.

Jefferson wants to die as silently as Christ, adding that he wants the time before his execution to pass quickly. He recalls that his parents left him with Miss Emma, and that he does not know where they are. Jefferson tells Grant that he is human, but that no one has seen his importance before, including Grant. Jefferson notes that it is only now, as he faces execution, that he is expected to be better than those around him. Grant says that his eyes have been closed before this, but that Jefferson is needed by everyone.

Jefferson asks what being executed will feel like. Grant assures him that it will not take long. He has read in a newspaper that the first surge of electricity causes a person to lose consciousness, but does not tell Jefferson this. Grant and Jefferson share baked potatoes as the chapter closes.

Chapter 28 Analysis

Grant's visit with Jefferson, just before Good Friday, is a symbolic comparison between Jefferson and Christ. The sharing of food between the two men is a symbolic comparison to Christ's Last Supper. Although Grant is the professional teacher,

Jefferson is giving Grant a purpose. Through Jefferson's conversation, Grant confesses to more religious belief than has been seen before, but he does not lie.

Jefferson's life is also explored more fully, including his poverty and lack of caring parents. These experiences seem to make the prospect of dying easier in Jefferson's mind, as he feels he has little to leave behind. Grant's reassurance that he will die quickly has a calming affect, which is an indicator of how Jefferson feels about Grant at this point.

Chapter 29

Chapter 29 Summary

This chapter is an excerpt from Jefferson's notebook, which has become a journal. The entries are a series of recollections, dreams and experiences as his execution approaches.

Jefferson writes of sleepless nights and a recurring dream, where he is walking somewhere he does not want to go, and another dream where he approaches a door that he does not want to go through. He wakes before he reaches a destination.

Jefferson recounts a visit with Miss Emma, Tante Lou and Reverend Ambrose. Miss Emma tells Jefferson that all she wants is for him to ask for God's forgiveness, because this will make her life worth living. She begins to cry and Jefferson writes that he is relieved when the visit is over.

During another sleepless night, Jefferson thinks of how Samson, the biblical figure, was angry with God, and wonders why God does not help poor, innocent people. In the next entry, Jefferson says that he thinks that God only helps white people, as he remembers working in the fields, taking water to African Americans who work the fields.

Jefferson observes that Grant looks tired. He says that he likes Grant, but cannot tell him because no one has ever shown affection for him. He says that he cares for Miss Emma, but questions if chores, such as carrying water and chopping wood, can be an expression of love.

In the next entry, Jefferson notes that he has a few days left to live. He desperately wants to see Miss Emma and says that he is glad Grant is pleased with him. Guidry, Pichot and Morgan come to see Jefferson. Pichot sharpens Jefferson's pencil with a small knife and then gives him the knife to keep. Morgan tells Pichot that it is not Friday yet, which is the day Jefferson will be executed. Pichot asks Morgan if he wants to double a wager; but Morgan just repeats that it is not Friday yet. Jefferson notes that Deputy Clark tries to behave in a kind manner, but Jefferson does not like him. Jefferson notes that Paul Bonin tries to behave in an authoritarian manner and not become too close to Jefferson, but he knows Bonin is a good man.

Grant brings his students to visit Jefferson, which surprises the young man as much as their kindness touches him. Jefferson's cousin, Estelle, kisses him, causing him to cry. A number of other people from the quarter visit Jefferson. During one visit, Jefferson receives a marble from a character named Ole Bok. Jefferson cries on his bunk after the visitors leave, because no one has ever shown him kindness.

Jefferson stops sleeping at night because he does not want to dream. During Miss Emma's last visit, Jefferson tells her he loves her. He tells her he will be strong and that she does not have to return to the jail.

Jefferson is deeply affected by Vivian's visit because he says he has never seen anyone as beautiful. In the next entry, Jefferson apologizes to Grant for crying when Grant tells him that he is not going to be with him during the execution. Jefferson says that Grant has been kinder to him than anyone ever has before. He says he knows that he will stay strong, because Reverend Ambrose and others will be with him.

Guidry asks Jefferson what he wants for supper. Jefferson asks for Miss Emma's okra and rice, pork chops, corn bread, "claba," ice cream and a moon pie. Jefferson watches his last sunset, knowing he will not sleep. After dinner, Guidry asks Jefferson what he writes in the tablet, but Jefferson remains vague. Guidry asks Jefferson to write that he has been treated fairly by Guidry in his notebook. Jefferson looks out his window at the moon, realizing that he will not see it again. As the night passes, Jefferson wonders about the existence of heaven and begins to tremble. He regrets going with Brother and Bear on the day that Alcee Grope died, but thinks that he will meet them again soon. His heart pounds and his teeth chatter but Jefferson writes that he will be a man. Jefferson writes that he is not sure if his words can be read, because his hand is now shaking. In his final entry, Jefferson asks Grant to tell, "them," that he is a good man, and writes a final goodbye to Grant. He writes that he will ask Paul Bonin to give the notebook to Grant.

Chapter 29 Analysis

Jefferson's diary provides a window into his thoughts and experiences until the morning of his execution. His recollections show the hardships he has suffered; yet Jefferson is not bitter. Although Jefferson questions whether God favors whites, he reverses his stance near the chapter's end by writing that he expects to meet Grope, Brother and Bear in heaven.

Jefferson does not see Grant's absence at his execution as cowardice or desertion. He notes his affection for Grant several times, showing a deep capacity for gratitude. He remains unimpressed by Chief Deputy Clark. He is convinced that Deputy Bonin is a good man, although it is obvious that Bonin is trying to avoid becoming friendly with him. Jefferson is clearly a sound judge of character, but does not change his mind easily.

Guidry's behavior is indicative of someone who wants to be viewed as having been fair with a man who is about to die. Guidry also allows Pichot to give Jefferson a knife to sharpen his pencil, an act that is more accommodating than expected. Pichot's conversation with Morgan about a wager is a hint that the men have bet on the possibility of a pardon.

Chapter 30

Chapter 30 Summary

The truck carrying the electric chair for Jefferson's execution moves through the town, as white and African American residents react nervously. Tante Lou stays at Miss Emma's home the night before the execution, along with many of the elderly residents of the community. Reverend Ambrose stays with Miss Emma until midnight, before returning to his home to sleep. He has been told by Guidry to be at the court by 11:30am. Grant sees Vivian at the Rainbow Club the night before the execution. Although the bar is more crowded, people remain subdued. Vivian tells Grant that she will have her class praying beside their desks until after Jefferson is executed. Grant returns to the quarter at midnight and goes home without seeing Miss Emma.

In the morning Reverend Ambrose prays, bathes and eats breakfast. Guidry breakfasts with Edna and wishes that the day had never arrived, but says that he must do his duty. He hopes that everything proceeds, "well", noting this is the first execution that he has supervised. Guidry tells Edna that he understands Grant's refusal to be present.

The electric chair's presence causes tension in the whites employed in the jail and those outside. The noise of the generator being tested can be heard throughout the town, making people edgier.

Paul Bonin, Sheriff Guidry and two special deputies, named Claude and Oscar Guerin, are in the sheriff's office with the executioner, Henry Vincent. Vincent asks Guidry if Jefferson has been shaved, and suggests that he should be. Guidry tells Bonin to have an inmate, named Murphy, make sure that Jefferson is well shaved. Vincent adds that hair can turn an execution into torture, which he does not want. Bonin asks if someone else can be assigned to supervise shaving Jefferson; but Guidry says that Clark is not available. When Bonin and Claude Guerin leave, Vincent questions Bonin's stability. The sheriff says that Bonin will be reliable.

Jefferson appears tired when Murphy and Bonin arrive. Jefferson asks about Claude's family, and is told that they are all right. Jefferson's head, ankles and wrists are shaved. His pant legs and the cuffs of his shirt are cut to expose the areas where electrodes will be placed. Jefferson tells Bonin that he wants him to give the notebook to Grant. He offers the radio to Bonin; but the deputy says he will give it to the other inmates. Bonin accepts the marble that Jefferson was given by Ole Bok, and agrees to return Pichot's knife.

Chapter 30 Analysis

This chapter illustrates the building tensions in all of the characters during the twenty-four hours preceding Jefferson's death. Understandably, some do not want Jefferson to die. While others may not care if he dies, they do not wish to be made aware of how or

when his death will be orchestrated. Jefferson's death will be an ugly reminder of injustice.

Guidry's comments show his personal justification for doing his job; and his tension is clear. He almost defends the subtle signs of Bonin's anxiety to the executioner by saying that Jefferson's execution will be Bonin's first. It will also be Guidry's first as a supervisor; but he does not share this with the executioner, highlighting his need to remain in control and appear unaffected by the proceedings.

Jefferson appears to be the calmest character discussed in this chapter. His behavior and his disposal of his possessions indicate that he has found a way to accept his fate.

Chapter 31

Chapter 31 Summary

Grant is at school, and the community is deserted and quiet. Grant looks toward Miss Emma's house and notes that she, and those who are with her, are remaining inside. He sees Reverend Ambrose's car leaving for the jail and feels like weeping. He wishes he could call Vivian. Grant wonders if God is with Jefferson, and thinks that the Reverend is a more courageous man than he, himself.

When the children return after lunch, Grant tells them to pray quietly on their knees and goes outside. He berates himself for not being with Jefferson. Sitting beneath a tree, Grant thinks that he cannot believe in a God that allows such injustice. He notices a butterfly on a patch of bull grass. He wonders why the butterfly stops on a patch of bull grass that does not offer it sustenance. When the butterfly goes, Grant knows that Jefferson is dead. Grant sees Paul Bonin's car.

Paul Bonin gives Jefferson's notebook to Grant. Grant goes into the classroom to tell the children that they can stop praying. Bonin tells Grant that Jefferson was the, "strongest man in that room, Grant Wiggins." Bonin says that Jefferson asked that Miss Emma be told that he walked to his execution. Bonin admits that he looked away after a hood was placed over Jefferson's head, and that he will never be able to forget the sound of the generator. He praises Grant as a great teacher, and says that he witnessed the changes in Jefferson. Grant replies that Jefferson or God were responsible for the changes.

Bonin says that he has not looked at Jefferson's notebook, but that he would like to know what the young man's thoughts were. Grant says that he will show it to Bonin after he has read it. Bonin suggests that Grant take a vacation with Vivian after the school closes. Grant says this will depend on what Vivian wants. He adds that he is deeply sorry for what has happened, and asks for Grant's friendship. Bonin says that Grant should tell his students about Jefferson's courage; but Grant says that Bonin might want to tell them himself, some time in the future. As the chapter ends Bonin says that he would consider it an honor.

Chapter 31 Analysis

Grant's attempts to ease his nearly overwhelming anxiety, by remaining in his classroom, fail, as his thoughts are with Jefferson. His struggle to align the existence of God and the existence of injustice is timeless. Grant finds no resolution for the paradox, evidenced as he instructs his students to pray, despite his own beliefs.

The butterfly fluttering on a patch of bull grass is symbolic of Jefferson's life and death. The butterfly has beauty and innocence, as Jefferson did. It does not remain long on the bull grass, as the plant cannot offer nourishment. This is a comparison to Jefferson's

short life and poverty. The butterfly's exit is symbolic of Jefferson's death. The butterfly goes to find a better source of nourishment. Jefferson is symbolically going to a better world when he dies.

Although Jefferson's dignity is something that Grant has worked for, he cannot accept Bonin's praise because of his self-contempt. When Grant tells Bonin that he will do whatever Vivian wants in the future, he is discussing a future that he knows will exist, even though his life will never be the same.

The lesson presented in *A Lesson Before Dying* is given by Jefferson. His triumph over bigotry, ignorance, poverty and hardship, through death,shows that the human spirit can never be completely crushed.

Characters

Reverend Mose Ambrose

As the plantation church's pastor, Reverend Ambrose ministers to the laborers and their families. Even though he has no formal education, he serves his people with a true dedication to his vocation. He baptizes, marries, and buries them and offers words of hope and encouragement through his preaching and caring. He and Grant Wiggins share the privilege of visits to Jefferson. Devoted to God, Reverend Ambrose worries about not only Jefferson's soul, but also Grant's. He continually tries to talk to Grant about God and encourages Grant to discuss God with Jefferson. He wants to know if Grant has determined Jefferson's deepest feelings about death and what it will mean for his soul. Grant, however, feels that Reverend Ambrose is responsible for preparing Jefferson's soul for death. Reverend Ambrose accuses Grant of being selfish and uneducated because Grant will not accept that heaven exists and will not use his relationship with Jefferson to get Jefferson to accept salvation. Reverend Ambrose believes Grant is a lost soul.

Vivian Baptiste

Vivian is Grant Wiggins's girlfriend, even though she is still married. A beautiful woman, she draws attention to herself wherever she goes. She has light skin, long black hair, high cheekbones, and greenish-brown eyes. She stands tall—about five foot seven—and dresses well. When Tante Lou and Miss Emma first meet her, they resent her light skin and the fact that Vivian seldom visits her parents. They change their minds about her, however, when they learn that she regularly attends church. They call her a "lady of quality." Grant knows that Vivian is a lady. Also a teacher, Vivian understands Grant and his desire to move elsewhere to teach and to see more of the world. Grant turns to Vivian for solace during the trying months of his relationship with Jefferson.

Bear

Bear is one of the two boys who pick Jefferson up on their way to Mr. Grope's store. Bear does all the talking. Not only does he ask and plead for the liquor, he also takes the first steps around the counter toward Mr. Grope. Bear and his friend, Brother, die in the altercation, along with Mr. Grope.

Paul Bonin

Paul is the young deputy at the jail. When Miss Emma asks the older deputy how Jefferson is, and the older deputy says, "Quiet," Miss Emma mistakes the response for a command that she be quiet. Paul quickly sees what has happened and answers her question with "Jefferson's been quiet," which relieves the tension. Paul speaks civilly to

both Miss Emma and Grant, not ordering them to do something, but asking them politely. For example, after checking Grant's pockets to make sure they are empty, Paul tells Grant that he can put his things back into his pockets. Paul is a white man with brown hair and gray-blue eyes and is a little younger than Grant. Paul takes Grant to Jefferson's cell each time Grant visits. As they see more of one another, Paul and Grant establish a sort of friendship, with Paul showing his sincere concern for Jefferson's fate. Paul hates having to search Grant when he visits and lets Grant know that he only does it because it is a matter of policy. Paul witnesses Jefferson's death and tries to tell Grant that he has done a good job as a teacher. Even though Paul and Grant do not agree on matters of faith, Paul tells Grant that he wants to be his friend.

Brother

Brother is one of the two boys who pick Jefferson up on their way to Mr. Grope's store. When a fight breaks out among Mr. Grope, Bear, and Brother, all three die.

Joe Claiborne

Joe Claiborne runs the Rainbow Club bar and is married to Thelma. He drives a new white Cadillac and allows customers to buy on credit when they need to. Friends gather at the Club to talk and drink. Grant visits the club often because he feels wanted there, and it is a place where he and Vivian can dance and be together.

Thelma Claiborne

Thelma Claiborne runs the Rainbow Club cafe and is married to Joe. She has a smile full of gold teeth and wears strong perfume. People can depend on Thelma for good food and friendly conversation.

Irene Cole

Irene Cole serves as Grant's student teacher and assists him with the younger students. Even though Grant can not see it, Irene harbors a secret love for him.

Emma Glenn

See Emma Nannan

Alcee Grope

Grope is the white storeowner whom Jefferson is accused of killing. Grope likes Jefferson and asks about his nannan. When the two boys Jefferson is with ask for

liquor, Grope refuses to give it to them because they do not have enough money to pay for it. The two boys are already drunk. A fight ensues, and Grope and the two boys are all dead when it is over.

Sam Guidry

Sam Guidry, the sheriff, always tries to put Grant Wiggins in his place. He expects Grant to behave like a subordinate, telling Grant when Grant uses proper grammar and speaks intelligently that he's too smart for his own good. As the sheriff, Guidry runs the jail, but he is seldom present when Grant visits. When he is on duty, Guidry looks like a cowboy; he wears a Stetson hat and cowboy boots. His appearance can intimidate people, though. Guidry has a strong face and large hands, and is tall and tanned. Guidry thinks that Grant's teaching Jefferson is a joke; he believes Jefferson is not only guilty of the crime, but stupid as well.

Mr. Henri

See Henri Pichot

Jefferson

A twenty-one-year-old slightly retarded black man, Jefferson has always lived on the Pichot plantation with his godmother, Miss Emma, or "Nannan," as he calls her. On his way to a bar one October day, Jefferson accepts a ride from two other young black men, Bear and Brother. Bear and Brother decide to stop to buy liquor but have no money between them. The two think the store owner, Mr. Grope, will allow them to get the liquor on credit. When they ask him, he disagrees, and they begin to argue. Already drunk, Bear starts around the counter. Mr. Grope gets his gun and begins to shoot. Before Jefferson knows what has happened, all three men are dead. Confused, he is still in the store when two white men find him. He gets blamed for robbing and killing the storeowner.

Jefferson's attorney tries to use Jefferson's mental disability as a defense, claiming he has no more intelligence than a hog. The white jury, however, finds Jefferson guilty, and the judge sentences him to the electric chair. Miss Emma resents Jefferson's being labeled a hog, and implores Grant Wiggins to teach him enough that he can walk to the electric chair with some pride.

When Wiggins begins his visits, Jefferson greets him with silence, the whites of his eyes bloodshot. Jefferson later replaces his silence with talk full of self-disgust and a sense of hopelessness. After months of visits, though, Jefferson begins to question Wiggins about God and heaven, his nannan, and life. Wiggins brings Jefferson a radio; they share a favorite announcer. He also gives Jefferson a notebook. Jefferson writes in the notebook until his death on Good Friday in April. From their conversations during

Jefferson's last days and the journal Jefferson has kept, Wiggins learns that to be a teacher, one has to believe. He concludes that Jefferson is the true teacher.

Inez Lane

The current cook at the plantation's big house, Inez greets Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Grant each time they visit Henri Pichot. She wears the white dress and shoes of a cook, with a blue gingham apron and kerchief on her head. Inez suffers for her friends when Mr. Pichot and his friends keep them waiting. She says little but continues her duties serving the head of the household and his white visitors.

Tante Lou

Tante Lou, Grant Wiggins's aunt, raised him. She is also Miss Emma's best friend, having worked with her in the big Pichot house as a washerwoman. A large person like Miss Emma, Tante Lou keeps Grant in line with her stern nature and her devout faith. She hates that Grant does not at- tend church or admit to believing in God. She avoids him entirely on Sundays. She expects Grant to visit and teach Jefferson because it is what she and Miss Emma want him to do. Tante Lou is the one who sent Wiggins to the university to make a better life for himself and the people around him. As a result, Tante Lou believes that Wiggins is obligated to do what he can for Jefferson.

Miss Emma Nannan

To Jefferson, Miss Emma is "Nannan," his godmother and the person who loves and has raised him. Although in her seventies, Miss Emma strikes a formidable appearance. She weighs nearly two hundred pounds and commands respect from everyone she knows. Even her late husband called her Miss Emma. Miss Emma used to cook for the plantation owner, Henri Pichot. She pins her gray hair to the top of her head and often sports a wellworn brown felt hat and overcoat with rabbit fur trimming the collar and sleeves. She knows that Jefferson has limited intelligence but wants him to learn to read and write before he dies. More importantly, she wants him to understand that he is a man and not the "hog" the court says he is. A religious woman, Miss Emma prays for Jefferson's soul and relies on Reverend Ambrose for spiritual guidance for her and Jefferson.

Henri Pichot

A medium-sized man with long white hair, Henri Pichot owns the plantation on which Grant's school is located and where Miss Emma, Jefferson, Tante Lou, and Grant live. As the plantation owner, Mr. Pichot lives in its main house, a large structure containing modern amenities available to the wealthy. Mr. Pichot begrudgingly meets with Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Grant to hear Miss Emma's request to allow Grant to visit Jefferson in his jail cell. Pichot only allows the visit because Miss Emma used to work

for him. Mr. Pichot is the sheriff's brother-in-law, so Miss Emma thinks that Mr. Pichot might be able to convince the sheriff to permit Wiggins's visits to the jail. Although Pichot quickly dismisses Miss Emma and her friends on their first visit, he appears to become more sympathetic to their cause as time goes on.

Louis Rougon

Henri Pichot's cohort, Louis Rougon owns the bank close to the plantation. He is present each time Grant visits the plantation house and wears the clothes of a successful businessman: gray suit, white shirt, and gray-and-white-striped tie. Rougon thinks it is amusing that Miss Emma wants Grant to teach Jefferson and smirks his thoughts in Grant's presence.

Mr. Sam

See Sam Guidry

Grant Wiggins

Grant Wiggins, the teacher, grew up on the Pichot plantation. Tante Lou, Grant's aunt and the plantation's washerwoman, raised him. Even though Tante Lou earned a living in the plantation's main house, she did not want Grant to have to enter the house ever again through the back door, the servant's entrance. Thus, she sacrificed to send him to the university to become a teacher, a respected member of society.

At the opening of the story, Grant has taught at the plantation school for six years. The school has not changed much since he left it ten years earlier, nor have the children changed. He knows the children and their families well. He knows which children will fail and which will succeed. He understands their family situations. He encourages the children to do the best they can and to help one another. The community, in turn, appreciates Grant's returning to the plantation to teach reading and writing. It is because Grant remains one of them, yet has the education no one else has, that Miss Emma chooses him to visit and teach Jefferson. Jefferson has just been convicted of killing the white storeowner and awaits his death. Grant is to try to teach Jefferson to be a man—to try to instill in him a sense of self-worth and pride.

Grant doubts first, his ability to reach Jefferson, and later, his ability to teach him anything of value. He feels frustrated with himself and angry with the system. Grant sees the injustice around him and realizes that he can do nothing to change it. For example, when Grant faces the sheriff or Henri Pichot, he knows that they expect him to act the part of a slave, bowing to their demands. This disturbs him so much that at one point, he fights a man for the hateful comments the man makes about Jefferson. When Grant needs understanding, he turns to Vivian Baptiste, his girlfriend. While Miss

Emma, Reverend Ambrose, and Tante Lou would like for Grant to help Jefferson find God, Grant knows that he is the wrong one to help Jefferson with this. Grant questions his own beliefs and is unable to assure Jefferson of heaven. In the end, Grant believes that Reverend Ambrose and Jefferson are the real teachers. Grant takes no credit for having prepared Jefferson to face death and feels a great sadness for the realization and for the loss of Jefferson's life.

Themes

Justice and Injustice

From the beginning until the very end of *A Lesson Before Dying* a sense of injustice prevails. While this theme derives from the larger theme of racism, Gaines uses specific incidents to demonstrate how underlying racist beliefs can result in miscarriage of justice. Jefferson innocently accepts a ride with two conniving young men who are planning to take advantage of a white businessman. When the three other men die in the resulting struggle, Jefferson, who is slightly retarded, does not really understand what has happened or even remember how he got there. Unfairly accused by two white men who come into the store and find Jefferson leaving with money and whiskey in his pockets, Jefferson is later tried and convicted for the crime and sentenced to die in the electric chair. The injustice continues after Jefferson is jailed, and it extends to the people he loves. Tante Lou, the Reverend, and Grant Wiggins suffer ill treatment when they try to arrange visitation and each time that they visit Jefferson thereafter. The intolerance shown by the white accusers, jurors, judge, and jailers results from their racist belief that they are superior to black people.

Civil Rights and Racism

The story takes place in the late 1940s when the country's Civil Rights movement was moving towards integration. Integration enables equal rights to all people, allowing them to live together in harmony regardless of their race or skin color. In the South, however, during the time this novel is set, segregation still reigns. Segregation, the opposite of integration, separates races. Racism results when one race views itself as superior over another and determines that it should have more rights than the other. This view held true in the South, particularly on the large plantations where many blacks labored for white landowners. Whites considered blacks inferior human beings. Whites did not want to associate with blacks in any way. Gaines provides clear examples of racist behavior and the varying effects racist behaviors have on people's lives.

In *A Lesson Before Dying* whites treat Jefferson unfairly through their actions, their words, and their attitudes. Not only are people inconsiderate of Jefferson, they also disenfranchise Jefferson's friends and family. For example, when his nannan, Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Grant Wiggins visit Mr. Pichot, they must enter through the kitchen. They are expected to remain there until Mr. Pichot and his associates summon them, which was, in one case, two hours later. Mr. Pichot and his companions also expect Grant Wiggins to act a certain way because he is black. Even though they know Wiggins is an educated man, they make it clear to him that he should mumble, use improper grammar, and not meet them eye-to-eye.

Not only did racism exist between the blacks and whites, but also between the blacks and mulattos. The mulattos were of mixed black and European heritage. They refused

to work side-by-side on the plantations with "niggers" and became bricklayers instead. Grant Wiggins fights two of them at the Rainbow Club one night when he hears them making derogatory comments about Jefferson and making light of Jefferson's impending death.

While racism abounds in the story, destroying people's lives along the way, one equitable relationship between a black man and a white man blossoms to serve as a beacon of hope for the future. Grant Wiggins and Paul Bonin forge the beginnings of a friendship. Paul, the young white deputy at the jail, sees beyond the color of Jefferson's skin and feels compassion for his situation. He appreciates, too, the part Grant Wiggins plays in trying to make the rest of Jefferson's life, and the thought of his upcoming death, more bearable. Paul tries to treat Wiggins with respect. He shows a deference for his education as well as his consideration for Jefferson and his nannan. When he speaks to Wiggins, he looks him in the eye and encourages Wiggins to do the same. He completes the required weapons searches on Wiggins less thoroughly than he might on someone he does not know or trust. Wiggins feels the same way about Paul. Wiggins understands that he and Paul have an appreciation for one another, although Wiggins does not feel worthy of Paul's. In the end, Paul compliments Wiggins on his teaching talent, even though Wiggins does not agree that he deserves the compliment. Paul tells Wiggins that he would like to be his friend.

God and Religion

Jefferson's relationship with God, and his understanding of faith, heaven, and salvation concern Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Reverend Ambrose. Miss Emma and Tante Lou think that Wiggins's visits to Jefferson will prepare Jefferson to die with some dignity. They think that Wiggins, with his education, knows what it will take to instill in Jefferson some sense of self-worth. They believe that Wiggins can tell what Jefferson's deepest thoughts are about life and his upcoming death. When Wiggins gives Jefferson a radio, Reverend Ambrose, Tante Lou, and Miss Emma are appalled, calling it a box of sin and telling Wiggins that Jefferson needs God in his cell rather than a disembodied radio announcer. Wiggins tells them that he himself is not the one to provide Jefferson with spiritual guidance, admitting that he questions heaven's existence and God's love.

Jefferson, too, struggles with faith issues until his dying day, wondering if God loves only white people. Yet, he walks to the chair a man rather than an unsure, beaten-down slave. Paul credits Wiggins's teaching for the transformation. Wiggins sarcastically attributes it to God's work.

Style

Setting

Gaines sets *A Lesson Before Dying* in and around the fictitious Bayonne, a small town in Louisiana. It is 1948. Some events occur on the plantation, either in the school where Grant Wiggins teaches or in the homes of Henri Pichot, Tante Lou, or Miss Emma. Other events occur at the jail or at the Rainbow Club.

The church serves as the school for the black children whose parents labor on the plantation. There are no desks; the children write on their laps or kneel in front of the benches that are pews on Sundays. Grant Wiggins's desk is the collection table during church services. A woodburning stove for which there is never enough fuel heats the classroom. The same sparseness exists in the homes of both Tante Lou and Miss Emma. Tante Lou shares her small home with Wiggins. The furniture is old, and the wallpaper peels away from the walls. While Tante Lou has added her own homey touches, the house has a tired feeling to it. Wiggins refers to it as "rustic." Miss Emma's home is even smaller, with the bed in the living room. Henri Pichot's house, however, is a huge house with modern appliances. Instead of a woodburning stove, the cook uses a gas range for cooking. The same black iron pots that Wiggins remembers from childhood hang on the wall, but the old icebox he had known has been replaced by a sparkling white refrigerator.

The important events of the story take place in the jail. The jail is located in the old red-brick courthouse that resembles a castle. Housing both black and white prisoners in different areas, the cells themselves are located on the second floor of the courthouse, at the top of a set of steel stairs. The cells of the other African-American prisoners have two metal bunks each. Jefferson's, however, has only one bunk, equipped with a mattress and wool blanket. A toilet, a washbowl, and a small metal shelf take up the rest of the six-foot by ten-foot cell. For light, there is only a single light bulb hanging from the center of the ceiling and a small, high, barred window.

Wiggins goes to the Rainbow Club for company and comfort. Green, yellow, and red neon lights advertise the combination bar and cafe. In the bar, Wiggins can choose to sit on a barstool at the counter or at one of the white-clothed tables in the dimly lit room. The cafe boasts both a lunch counter and tables with cheery red-and-whitecheckered tablecloths.

Point of View

Gaines uses the first person point of view to tell the story of Grant Wiggins. That is, Wiggins tells the story himself as the events affect him. By using his voice, Gaines can easily portray the intense emotions that Wiggins feels in relationship to the other characters and the struggles they endure. The resulting narrative enables Gaines to

connect his fiction with historical reality. Gaines shares his own life experiences and perceptions with his readers through the lives and emotions of his characters. He aptly weaves fact and fiction to present his reflections on the Southern world that he knows existed. A twist to the typical personal narrative, though, is Jefferson's journal. Reading the entries, Wiggins knows Jefferson's innermost thoughts. By definition, a first-person narrator does not know what another character is thinking.

Style

Critics often compare Gaines's stories to epics. Although epics are usually in the form of long narrative poems, there are similarities between the two: both describe extraordinary achievements or events; and both have epic characters that stand heroic in the face of large-scale deeds. In the case of Wiggins, there is no hope that he can save Jefferson from the death that he will suffer as a result of a society's large-scale racist beliefs. Yet, Wiggins does help Jefferson gain self respect before he dies, in spite of the efforts of those who would persecute Jefferson for his skin color. Paul Bonin views Wiggins as a hero even if Wiggins, himself, does not.

Historical Context

Black Civil Rights in the Late 19th Century

The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, was the first step towards freeing slaves. With the Emancipation Proclamation, President Lincoln declared that slaves would be freed in any Confederate states that did not return to the Union by January 1, 1863. While the Emancipation Proclamation didn't set slaves free immediately, it did commit the Union to ending slavery. Congressional Acts after that date granted blacks various civil rights. In 1866 and 1870, blacks received the rights to sue, be sued, and own property. With these rights, blacks gained the "privileges" of white citizens. The Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, in 1868, further extended black privileges, making former slaves eligible for citizenship. The Fifteenth Amendment gave blacks the right to vote and prevented state or federal governments from denying any citizen of this right on the basis of race. Blacks received further acceptance through the Civil Rights Act of 1871, which made it a crime to deny citizens of equal protection under the law, and the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which guaranteed blacks the right to use public accommodations.

The political climate in the United States shifted in the mid-1880s, however, to an attitude of indifference towards social justice. The Civil Rights Act of 1875 (right to public accommodations) was declared unconstitutional. Then, the Supreme Court legally instituted segregation through its decision in the case of Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896. Homer Plessy had been arrested and convicted for refusing to sit in a railroad car that was designated for African Americans. When he appealed his conviction on the grounds that it denied him his rights under the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments, the Supreme Court overruled him. The Court upheld the principle of "separate but equal" facilities for blacks and whites. Even into the 1930s when Ernest Gaines was born, this principle and attitude towards blacks prevailed. Gaines set *A Lesson Before Dying* in the late 1940s, but the remnants of segregation still existed. The jail where Jefferson was incarcerated had a separate block of cells for African-American inmates, in addition to separate restroom facilities for African-American visitors to the jail.

Segregation in the South

Taking a step backwards after the Supreme Court's decision in the Plessy case, integration seemed impossible. Segregation was well established in the Northern states through custom rather than law. This was known as "de facto" segregation. Following the Plessy case, however, the South decreed laws that legalized racial segregation. This legal segregation is called "de jure" segregation. The laws that accomplished de jure segregation in the South are known as the Jim Crow laws, named after a pre-Civil War minstrel show character. These laws created a racial caste system in the South that held strong until 1954, when the Supreme Court declared public-school segregation unconstitutional in the Brown v. Board of Education case in Topeka, Kansas.

Early Steps Towards Integration in the 20th Century

The early 1900s saw steps being taken towards integration through two movements. One group worked towards equal treatment through integration; the other group wanted to establish a separate black state. In 1909, W. E. B. Du Bois founded the National Association for the Advancement of Col- ored People (NAACP). The NAACP still exists today and works for equality through integration. Another leader in the integration movement was Marcus Garvey, who founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in 1914 to work towards a separate black state through black nationalism. While the UNIA no longer exists, the black nationalist movement continues.

Efforts to integrate continued to progress through the 1930s and 1940s. Black leaders found powerful support in black unions such as the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters who helped apply economic pressure to pass such acts as the 1947 Fair Employment Practices Act. This legislation prevented discrimination in hiring on the basis of race or national origin. In 1948, Harry Truman ordered the integration of the armed forces. These early efforts to end segregation culminated in the Supreme Court ruling in the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education case. The ruling declared separate schools for blacks and whites unconstitutional.

Critical Overview

Gaines' sixth novel, *A Lesson Before Dying,* provides more support for his reputation as a talented writer. Since the 1964 publication of *Catherine Carmier,* his writing has served to present African-American culture in the same authentic light as the stories shared orally by the people who have lived them. Reading the stories of Ernest Gaines nearly equals having the experiences.

Critics agree that Gaines has a true sense of characterization. He asserts that his characters appear realistic because he has shaped them from people he knew while growing up on a Louisiana plantation. He cites the influence of Russian writers on his characterization. Russian writers relate stories about their peasant countrymen in a way that is caring, yet not cloying. These writers present truths without being harsh or disapproving. Gaines presents his people, his characters, in this same manner. He describes Southern blacks as he knows they truly are, not as they are represented in stories he read as a young man. The characters he encountered in those books were foreign to him. After failing to find accurate stories about his people, he decided to write them himself. Gaines told Joseph McLellan in the *Washington Post,* "If the book you want doesn't exist, you try to make it exist." The strength of his characters complements his exceptional writing. Just as "a swimmer cannot influence the flow of a river □" says Larry McMurtry in the *New York Times Book Review,* "the characters of Ernest Gaines □ are propelled by a prose that is serene, considered and unexcited."

Gaines's "serene" prose belies the serious nature of his writing. Part of the appeal of his work lies in the way that he handles life's intense themes in his stories. In fact, his stories do not always have happy endings. Gaines presents truths in his novels; critics applaud this. They commend him, for example, for confronting the tough issues that destroy relationships among people, yet build character and strength. His characters often struggle with questions that test their belief systems and pit friends or family members against one another. To illustrate, in one story, a young woman must choose between her father and her lover, a choice forced by the racial and social differences between them. In others, characters search for human dignity and pride. They face alienation and loneliness as well. As an example, both Jefferson and Wiggins experience isolation and desolation in *A Lesson Before Dying.* Yet the story really honors man's natural instinct to persevere in the face of adversity. This is demonstrated in Jefferson's learning the lessons that enable him to walk to his death with a sense of who he really is.

Reviewers often compare his writing to William Faulkner's. The story for example, takes place on a plantation near the small, imaginary town of Bayonne, Louisiana. This region compares to Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, a fictional county in rural Mississippi. Like Faulkner, Gaines created the place and its people from experiences and relationships he actually had as a child. Another comparison made between Gaines's and Faulkner's writing has to do with the characters the two writers portray. Faulkner writes about two families. One, the Sartoris family, boasts years of wealthy prominence in the community. The other, the newly rich Snopes family, lacks the social graces of

people born into the area's aristocracy. Gaines aristocracy and "lesser quality" people are the southern white plantation owners and the Cajuns, respectively. The plantation owners, although French descendants themselves, consider themselves a higher class than the Cajuns, who are direct descendants of Canadian French. Of even lesser nobility, according to the southern class structure, are the blacks and the Creoles. The Creoles are often of mixed black and European heritage and referred to as mulattos. As do Faulkner's works, his stories reveal the complex socioeconomic interactions among his characters but even more explicitly point out the relationships between the blacks and whites.

Critics agree that his African-American heritage lends a uniquely original perspective to his stories. According to Alvin Aubert in his essay in *Contemporary Novelists,* "Gaines's peculiar point of view generates a more complex social vision than Faulkner's, an advantage Gaines has sustained with dramatic force and artistic integrity."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

David J. Kelly is a literature and creative writing instructor at College of Lake County and Oakton Community College in Illinois. In this essay he examines how the inaction of Grant Wiggins, the book's narrator, might make readers uncomfortable.

Readers who do not want to take the time to learn from fiction, who want a novel to have a straightforward, simple message, might find Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* a frustrating experience. This is definitely a moral book, with a distinct sense of right and wrong, but it is also too wise about the ways of the world to oversimplify the morals of its characters. For instance, if Jefferson were merely a witness to the liquor store shootings, then readers could easily agree that he is victimized by the legal system, but Gaines, rather than leaving him one hundred percent innocent, has him empty out the store's cash register. His lawyer certainly commits an offense against humanity by comparing Jefferson to a hog, but he does so for a good cause, to save the boy's life. Tante Lou and Miss Emma are too abrupt and narrow-minded to be thought of as saints, but they are too compassionate to be dismissed as comic types. It is not easy for a reader to interact with well-rounded characters: by their very nature, they challenge our assumptions. The more difficult they are, the more we can learn about the complexity of life.

For me, Grant Wiggins was a difficult character. I admired him at times, but more often I found myself annoyed with him. This annoyance was tiny, more like an itch than a headache, so that at first I could not be sure that I was feeling it at all. Once I accepted the fact that I was not comfortable with Grant, I had to question what it was about him, and, more importantly, about me, that was causing the problem. As much as I liked the book, why couldn't I get along with its narrator? It wasn't that he had bad circumstances, because seeing characters overcome bad circumstances is what reading is all about: we can detest a character's circumstances and still admire the character. It wasn't that he had too much misery for me to bear, because his life really wasn't that bad. The good things he *did* have, he didn't appreciate, but that should not have bothered me—there is no reason a reader should have to agree with the values of the narrator in order for the book to be a meaningful experience.

I kept waiting for him to choose what he wanted to be, to be what he chose to be. I was kept in an uneasy middle ground, watching him do the wrong things, bickering and storming out in the middle of conversations. I waited for him to quit blaming and hating the people who cared about him. For a while I thought that my complaint might be a charge against the author's artistry: Grant seems to be more passive than a protagonist ought to be, observing and complaining but avoiding interaction with his surroundings when he can, and writers and critics generally agree that passive protagonists are the cause of weak novels. But he *has* to be reserved in order for the novel to work—its whole point is to lead us to the last two words, when Grant shows emotion that he kept bottled up throughout. Then I considered whether my impatience with him was cultural: I am a white man from the North, born a few generations after the time of the book, and I checked and rechecked my values to see if I was turning against the oppressed, using

that "Why don't these people quit complaining?" nonsense that we have all used to filter out other people's problems throughout history. It's a lot easier to believe in self-determination when mainstream society welcomes you. Still, even accounting for my own distance from the situation, it seemed that Grant knew himself well enough to have more control over his destiny than he exercised here.

Thinking it over, I am convinced now that there is no other way Grant can be but frustrating.

The story would be more pleasant to read if he would either do something heroic or something that readers can clearly disagree with, but a novel like that would make a different point than the one Gaines makes here.

There is a parallel here that is obvious but nicely left unstated, between the cell that Jefferson is held in and the fact that Grant, free as he is, feels locked into a position he never asked for. He sees himself as being penned in, circumscribed, as having his options cut off at all sides. To begin with, being a black man in the South limits his options drastically, narrowing his life to such a degree that any encounter with white people is bound to end in an insult to his intelligence, his compassion and his humanity. And if it wasn't bad enough that the cultural mainstream works to keep out Grant and people like him, he feels his life narrowed further still by the people within his own society. He feels trapped by his aunt Lou and those of her generation (note that the book begins with Grant feeling hemmed in between the hugeness of Tante Lou and Miss Emma at an event he did not even attend); by Vivian, who he blames for holding him back, keeping him from wandering the world; and by the responsibilities that come of being a teacher, of having to care for the problems of students and their parents and having to uphold a certain position of respect in a community where education is rare and valuable.

The beauty of Gaines's achievement here is that he does not feel that he has to make Grant Wiggins suffer like a saint in order to make readers sympathetic. There is undeniably some reference to the suffering of Christ surrounding the way Jefferson is treated, but that is not presented as any sort of hidden meaning: even Jefferson, uneducated as he is, recognizes the unavoidable symbolism. Grant himself is too sophisticated to be seen as a martyr. He is too well-educated to entirely hold our sympathies: we expect him to come up with a reason for putting up with being involved in this, but he keeps saying that he is only there to please others. He alternates between blaming Vivian for tethering him to this small parish and moaning that he loves her, but he cannot answer her when she asks what he means by love. He lives in his aunt's home while trying to avoid contact with her friends and her beliefs. He seems to never be in the classroom with his students, and finds himself distracted whenever he starts to grade their papers, all the while complaining that they never seem to learn. The white deputy, Paul, tries to reach out to him at the end, to span the gulch that divides the races, and Grant stays mum. As Reverend Ambrose explains, he is trying to keep himself above the complication of hypocrisy, to avoid telling the lie that is necessary to save someone's feelings. Is it *really* circumstances that have penned him in? Or has he jailed himself? He's just likable enough as a narrator for me to want to see the world as

he sees it, but I also have learned through years of reading to not fully trust a narrator who feels that his problems are caused by bad luck, that things just have not been going his way.

Grant himself would deny that he is claiming bad luck for the problems that make him unhappy with the world around him. He has his own view of the universe that explains, in very sensible and objective terms, why he does not belong, and why those around him need to feel that he does belong with them and therefore fool themselves into thinking that they love him. Social forces drive black men from the South, he tells Vivian, and those who stay are broken by the system. Having not left, though he would like to, Grant feels that his education, and the social position that comes with it, make him the most high-profile unbroken figure around. He feels like a conspicuous target for Irene, his aunt, Miss Emma, or any other woman who feels the absence of a strong man. To him, then, it makes sense that the world that he does not want to be part of does not want to let him go. He doesn't take their love personally, nor does he feel any responsibility for it.

To his credit, he sees the strength to be a part of society *and* to be strong as something that Jefferson can achieve better than he can. I think the reason I am unconvinced by his case, though, is that I don't understand why being part of society has to equate with "being broken," even if it is an oppressed society like a black community in the rural mid-century South. Obviously, this might be the cultural difference between me and Jefferson showing—I am certainly not broken by being a part of my society, but then, for me, social success is not tied to keeping my eyes down and my mouth shut, waiting, or calling people I do not respect "Sir" and "Ma'm." I can understand why Grant would consider a black man accepted by white society to be "broken."

But what about within his own society? Every society has its outcasts, who like to believe that they are not a part of the group that they actually do belong to. I have known too many people in social situations that are nothing like Grant's, but who fear becoming a part of the world around them.

They think of themselves as radicals, as free spirits who don't want their own uniqueness to be ruined by rubbing up against the commonness of the people around them. Grant calls it being broken; others call "selling out"; still others have no name for it, they just aren't content with where they are and they wish that people would leave them alone. These are the passive protagonists in life. Their stories don't usually make pleasurable reading.

That uneasiness I mentioned before has to be there. It is the sign that Ernest Gaines did not make Grant too comfortably sympathetic, which a lesser writer would do without thinking, and that he also did not make Grant so obnoxious that a reader would stop before traveling 256 pages with him. I wanted Grant to choose what he wanted to be and to be what he'd chosen—imagine, if the story had been tailored to my comfort, how little I would have learned about the world he lives in. Grant Wiggins is a complex character, neither saintly nor profoundly flawed, just smart enough to paint over his personal quirks to make them look like the consequences of the world around him. I

don't know if I would like to know him. but I'm a much better person for having seen his world, and having seen it through his eyes.

Source: David J. Kelly, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

In the following review of A Lesson Before Dying, Senna emphasizes Gaines's ability to evoke the social climate of the South in the 1940s and its foreshadowing of the 1960s Civil Rights movement.

Near the end of Ernest J. Gaines's novel A Lesson Before Dying, set in the fictional town of Bayonne, Louisiana, in 1948, a white sheriff tells a condemned black man to write in his diary that he has been fairly treated. Although the prisoner assents, nothing could be farther from the truth in that squalid segregated jail, which is an extension of the oppressive Jim Crow world outside.

A black primary school teacher, Grant Wiggins, narrates the story of Jefferson, the prisoner, whose resignation to his execution lends credence to the lesson of Grant's own teacher, Matthew Antoine: the system of Jim Crow will break down educated men like Grant and prisoners like Jefferson to "the nigger you were born to be."

Grant struggles, at first without success, to restore a sense of human dignity to Jefferson, a semiliterate, cynical and bitter twenty-one-year-old man, who accepts his own lawyer's depiction of him as "a hog" not worthy of the court's expense. The social distance between the college-educated Grant and Jefferson appears as great as that between the races, and class differences often frustrate their ability to communicate. It does not help that Grant has intervened only reluctantly, prompted by his aunt, a moralizing scold and a nag, and by Jefferson's godmother, Miss Emma.

Mr. Gaines, whose previous novels include *A Gathering of Old Men* and *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman,* admirably manages to sustain the somber tone of the issues confronting the black citizens of Bayonne. What is at stake becomes clear. We find Grant vicariously sharing in the triumphs of Joe Louis and Jackie Robinson. The larger-than-life achievements of these black heroes make it intolerable to the black folks that Jefferson die ignobly. For that reason, Grant, who makes no secret of his disdain for Jefferson, reluctantly becomes their instrument in trying to save him from disgrace. Justice, or Jefferson's innocence, becomes secondary to the cause of racial image building —no trifling matter.

With the day of Jefferson's execution approaching, Grant begins to despair. Jefferson himself dismisses appeals from Grant and the blacks of Bayonne that he die with dignity —like a man, not like a hog.

To complicate the plot further, Grant must overcome another racial divide, crossing the color line to love a divorced Creole woman, Vivian Baptiste. She becomes yet another reason why Grant must save Jefferson's dignity, if not save him from execution. By rejecting Creole prejudice against blacks, Vivian must accept that she too has a stake in how Jefferson confronts the electric chair. She crosses the black-brown line, to the horror of other Creoles and the subtle animosity of Grant's black relatives.

It is a tribute to Mr. Gaines's skill that he makes the conflicts convincing. Jefferson, chained and securely behind bars, still has one freedom left, and that is the freedom to choose how he accepts death.

Despite the novel's gallows humor and an atmosphere of pervasively harsh racism, the characters, black and white, are humanly complex and have some redeeming quality. At the end, Jefferson's white jailer, in a moving epiphany, is so changed that he suggests the white-black alliance that will emerge a generation later to smash Jim Crow to bits.

The New England abolitionist preacher William Ellery Channing observed just before the Civil War that "there are seasons, in human affairs, of inward and outward revolution, when new depths seem to be broken up in the soul, when new wants are unfolded in multitudes, and a new and undefined good is thirsted for." *A Lesson Before Dying,* though it suffers an occasional stylistic lapse, powerfully evokes in its understated tone the "new wants" in the 1940s that created the revolution of the 1960s. Ernest J. Gaines has written a moving and truthful work of fiction.

Source: Carl Senna, "Dying like a Man: A Novel about Race and Dignity in the South," in *The New York Times Book Review,* August 8, 1993, p. 21.

Critical Essay #3

In the following review, Larson focuses on Gaines's treatment of human dignity and the "morality of connectedness" in A Lesson Before Dying.

The incident that propels the narrative of Ernest J. Gaines's rich new novel is deceptively simple. Shortly after World War II, in a Cajun Louisiana town, a twenty-one-year-old black man who is barely literate finds himself in the wrong place at the wrong time, an innocent bystander during the robbery of a liquor store. The white store owner is killed, as are the two black men who attempt to rob the store; Jefferson—who is just standing there—panics. He grabs a bottle of liquor and starts drinking it. Then he looks at the phone, knowing he should call someone, but he's never used a dial phone in his life. Flight seems the only option, but as he leaves the store, two white customers enter.

That event takes place at the beginning of *A Lesson Before Dying,* Gaines' most rewarding novel to date, and it's followed by a brief summary of Jefferson's trial. The twelve white jurors find him guilty, assuming he's an accomplice of the two other black men, and the judge sentences Jefferson to death by electrocution. Much of what follows in this often mesmerizing story focuses on Jefferson's slow rise to dignity and manhood.

The obstacle to be overcome is a derogatory remark made by the defense during the trial, supposedly to save Jefferson from the death sentence. The lawyer asks the jurors, "Do you see a man sitting here? Look at the shape of this skull, this face as flat as the palm of my hand.□ Do you see a modicum of intelligence? Do you see anyone here who could plan a murder, a robbery □ can plan anything? A cornered animal to strike quickly out of fear, a trait inherited from his ancestors in the deepest jungle of blackest Africa—yes, yes, that he can do—but to plan?... No, gentlemen, this skull here holds no plans. What you see here is a thing that acts on command."

Finally, wrapping up his plea, the lawyer concludes, "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."

The fallout from the lawyer's defense is devastating. In his cell, after receiving the death sentence, Jefferson is close to catatonic. As his aged godmother, Emma, and her friends try to make contact with him, he withdraws further into himself. In one wrenching scene when they bring him homecooked food, he gets down on all fours and ruts around in the food without using his hands.

The complexity of this painful story is richly enhanced by Gaines's ironic narrator, Grant Wiggins. Only a few years older than Jefferson, Grant is college educated and a parish school teacher. Bitter in his own way and aloof from the community he has come to loathe, Grant is initially uninvolved, until his aunt (Miss Emma's friend) asks that he try to make Jefferson into a man. This quest for manhood becomes the emotional center of the story and a challenge for Grant himself to become reconnected to his people.

Assuming he will fail, Grant articulates his feelings to his mistress:

"We black men have failed to protect our women since the time of slavery. We stay here in the South and are broken, or we run away and leave them alone to look after the children and themselves. So each time a male child is born, they hope he will be the one to change this vicious circle—which he never does. Because even though he wants to change it, and maybe even tries to change it, it is too heavy a burden because of all the others who have run away and left their burdens behind. So he, too, must run away if he is to hold on to his sanity and have a life of his own.□ What she wants is for him, Jefferson, and me to change everything that has been going on for three hundred years."

Grant's task is further complicated by the local minister, who believes that saving Jefferson's soul is more important than making him into a man. The tensions between the teacher and the preacher add still another complex dimension to Gaines's formidable narrative.

Nowhere is the story more moving than in the scenes in which Grant and Jefferson are together in Jefferson's cell, agonizing over his horrific past—for Jefferson has been shaped not only by the animalistic designation thrust upon him in his twenty-first year but also by the deprivations of the previous twenty.

When Grant can finally mention the unspeakable —the last day of Jefferson's life— Jefferson tells him, "I never got nothing I wanted in my whole life." When asked what he wants to eat that last day, Jefferson responds, "I want me a whole gallon of ice cream.□ Ain't never had enough ice cream. Never had more than a nickel cone. Used to □ hand the ice cream man my nickel, and he give me a little scoop on a cone. But now I'm go'n get me a whole gallon. That's what I want—a whole gallon. Eat it with a pot spoon."

More than any other novel about African- American life in the United States, *A Lesson Before Dying* is about standing tall and being a man in the face of overwhelming adversity. And, equally important, Gaines's masterpiece is about what Ralph Ellison and William Faulkner would call the morality of connectedness, of each individual's responsibility to his community, to the brotherhood beyond his self. This majestic, moving novel is an instant classic, a book that will be read, discussed and taught beyond the rest of our lives.

Source: Charles R. Larson, "End as a Man," in *Chicago Tribune Books,* May 9, 1993, p. 5.

Topics for Further Study

Define capital punishment. Trace its history since ancient times. Discuss the reforms introduced throughout the ages to eliminate the use of capital punishment.

Research capital punishment. Take a position for or against it. Prepare to defend your position in a classroom debate.

Critics refer to Gaines as a master storyteller. He, himself, credits others for the stories they told when he was growing up and that he has borrowed. In other words, the "oral tradition" greatly influences his writing. Describe the relative importance of the tradition in various cultures and explain the purposes the tradition serves for different peoples.

Even though is set in the late 1940s, racism still exists in the small town of Bayonne. Trace the history of the Civil Rights movement. Relate your findings to the fictional events that occur in the story.

What Do I Read Next?

Gaines's 1964 novel, *Catherine Carmier* shows how characters deal with decisions based on their beliefs. Catherine, the daughter of a rich Creole, falls in love with Jackson Bradley, a black man caught between his love for Catherine and his understanding of the world beyond the community in which they live.

Also a story of disallowed love, *Of Love and Dust* continues Gaines's search for human dignity. Published by Dial in 1967, Gaines's second novel portrays the doomed relationship between a black man and his white boss's wife.

Many critics consider Gaines's third novel, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman,* his best work. The narrative recounts events in Miss Jane Pittman's background that originate during the Civil War and continue through the 1960s. The 1971 novel takes the reader on a trip back through time.

Knopf published Gaines's fifth novel, *A Gathering of Old Men,* in 1983. Someone kills a white Cajun boss on a Louisiana plantation. When the lynch mob arrives to hang the black man they have decided is guilty, a group of elderly black men and a young white woman surround the accused and claim individual responsibility for the murder.

Harper Lee wrote *To Kill a Mockingbird* in 1960. Combining the themes of racial prejudice and a child's perception of southern smalltown life, the story is about a reticent black man who is accused of rape, the man who defends him, and a nine-year-old girl who narrates the tale.

Written by Albert French in 1993, *Billy* chronicles the tragic tale of two black boys growing up in the 1930s who fight back when they are attacked and accidentally commit murder. Tenyear- old Billy is charged, tried as an adult, sentenced to death row, and electrocuted.

Further Study

Alvin Aubert, "Ernest J. Gaines: Overview," in *Contemporary Novelists,* 6th ed., edited by Susan Windisch Brown, St. James Press, 1996.

The author provides not only points of comparison between the work of Gaines and Faulkner, but also an overview of how black-white relationships become the basic element in each of Gaines's novels.

H. A. Baker, and P. Redmond, P, editors, *AfroAmerican Literary Study in the 1990's (Black Literature and Culture),* University of Chicago Press, 1989.

This is first in a series of volumes dedicated to the scholarly study of African-American literature and culture.

B. Bell, "African American Literature," in *Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia [CD-ROM],* Grolier Interactive, Inc., 1998.

An explanation of the tradition of African-American literature and its attributes. The author explains the effects of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and nationality on literature and discusses African-American literature in terms of genres and their contributing writers.

J. Dizard, "Racial Integration," in *Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia [CD-ROM],* Grolier Interactive, Inc., 1998.

The author defines and gives the history of racial integration in the United States and provides references to Civil Rights acts of particular importance.

D. C. Estes, *Critical Reflections on the Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines,* University of Georgia Press (Athens), 1994.

This series of essays provides a comprehensive look at Gaines's work, including the themes he addresses, the techniques he uses, and his use of humor. The author also presents comparisons to other writers' works.

R. Laney, Ernest *J. Gaines: Louisiana Stories,* Video Production by Louisiana Public Broadcasting, Louisiana Educational Television Authority. [Online] Available http://oscar.lpb.org/programs/gaines/, 1998.

This video production provides viewers with an overview of the life of Ernest Gaines. Through interviews with Gaines, his lifetime acquaintances, and prominent writers and scholars, the viewer will come to an appreciation of Gaines and the influences on his writing.

V. Smith, and A. Walton, editors, *African American Writer,* Charles Scribner Sons, 1991.

A compilation of essays that are a combination of biography and literary criticism. They focus on the unique experiences of African Americans and their culture and tradition in the context of American history.

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Jerry H. Bryant, *Iowa Review,* Winter, 1972.

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Joseph McLellan, in *Washington Post,* January 13, 1976.

Larry McMurtry, in *New York Times Book Review,* November 19, 1967.

Alice Walker, in *New York Times Book Review,* October 30, 1983.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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