

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

A Lesson Before Dying

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A Lesson Before Dying

Objectives

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

1. recognize how setting, mood, and tone complement the themes of the novel.
2. understand how biblical allusions resonate with the plot and characters in *A Lesson Before Dying*.
3. identify allusions to well-known contemporaries of the characters in the novel and analyze their relationship to the themes of the novel.
4. evaluate the effectiveness of the first-person narration and the narrative device of incorporating other characters' voices.
5. analyze how the social and racial stratification in 1948 Louisiana affects the lives of the characters.
6. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
7. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
8. offer a close reading of *A Lesson Before Dying* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

Introductory Lecture

HISTORICAL SETTING

The Segregated South: *A Lesson Before Dying* takes place in Louisiana in the late 1940s. At that time, segregation was the law of the land in the southern states, including Louisiana. This meant that, by law, blacks and whites had separate public accommodations, from public schools and churches to restaurants, taverns, hotels, and drinking fountains. In places of employment and public buildings (such as the courthouse in *A Lesson Before Dying*), blacks and whites had to use separate entrances and separate bathrooms; undertakers had to provide separate hearses for blacks and whites; separate graveyards were mandated by law; and in some states blacks were denied access to public parks. Blacks and whites lived in separate neighborhoods (such as the “quarter” in *A Lesson Before Dying*). Marriage between blacks and whites was prohibited. Voting rights were also restricted for blacks. These segregationist laws were known as “Jim Crow” laws.

Sixteen southern states were responsible for 79 percent of the segregationist laws in the country. Louisiana had twenty-nine individual segregationist laws in force. The other southern states where segregation was the law of the land were Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. Although blacks in the South enjoyed equal rights immediately after the Civil War, with the end of Reconstruction in 1876, Southern states began reinstating segregationist laws. The Supreme Court case Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) codified segregation with its ruling that “separate but equal” did not violate the rights of African-Americans.

A later Supreme Court overturned the “separate but equal” doctrine in 1954 with the decision in *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, ending legal racial discrimination in public education.

From the time of slavery (outlawed in 1863 by President Abraham Lincoln, when he signed the Emancipation Proclamation, during the Civil War) through the 1940s, the Ku Klux Klan exerted a strong influence in the South, holding rallies, burning crosses, dragging black families out of their homes, and murdering blacks. Very few Klansmen were ever arrested or punished for their crimes.

Segregation exerted unspoken rules of social convention that stunted the humanity of both blacks and whites. In that context, seeing oneself as human—the point of Miss Emma’s pushing Grant Wiggins to visit her godson in prison in *A Lesson Before Dying*—becomes a form of heroism.

As shown in the novel, individuals sometimes managed to circumvent unspoken rules and undermine the power of social convention. For instance, Miss Emma prevails on Henri Pichot to speak to his brother-in-law, the sheriff, to arrange for Grant Wiggins to visit Jefferson in prison. She uses as leverage everything she has done for the family over the years in running their household. Even though Pichot is uncomfortable about this request, he nonetheless feels compelled to accede to it.

Writing and Discussion Topics

1. How does the courtroom scene in Chapter 1 exemplify the social and racial stratification in 1948 Louisiana?
2. What is the significance of the narrator's position as a teacher—a black man with a college education—in light of what Miss Emma asks him to do?
3. Like a Greek tragedy, the plot of *A Lesson Before Dying* moves to an inescapable conclusion. Yet a subtle shift occurs toward the end that elevates Jefferson, as well as Grant Wiggins, making both of them heroic, though flawed, characters. Describe each of these shifts, citing specific events that prompt them and explain what these shifts mean to Jefferson and Grant.
4. Food is laden with meaning throughout *A Lesson Before Dying*. Explain the meaning of food to Tante Lou and Miss Emma. Touch on the difference in how food is viewed by men and women in the novel.
5. The narrator draws an analogy between the students he is trying to teach in the plantation church school and the lesson he has been asked to teach Jefferson before he is executed. Explain what underlies these two types of lessons and why the narrator finds it such an uphill battle to get through to his students.
6. Cite specific examples from *A Lesson Before Dying* in which the “system” dehumanized and emasculated male characters. Then point out how Grant, Jefferson, and Reverend Ambrose manage to express their humanity despite the oppression imposed by segregation.
7. What does the word *hog* mean to the characters in *A Lesson Before Dying*? Explain how the public defender's comparison of Jefferson to a hog in Chapter 1 affects Jefferson, Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Grant. Also delve into what the sheriff means when he refers to Jefferson as a hog in Chapter 6 (speaking of him as either a “contented hog” or an “aggravated hog”) and why it is so unsettling when Jefferson himself acts like a hog in Chapter 11.
8. Much is left unspoken and unsaid in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Citing specific examples of this literary technique, explain how reality is inferred by the characters and why so much needs to be left unsaid.

A Lesson Before Dying

Chapter 1

1. Explore the significance of the opening sentence. Consider the manner in which the sentence introduces a central theme of the novel—the search for manhood. “I was not there, yet I was there.”

2. Compare and contrast how the prosecutor’s argument differs from the public defender’s argument.

3. From whose perspective is the story of the robbery and shooting told? Is this story presented as fact or as a subjective account?

Chapter 10

1. Why is the narrator so angry at his aunt?

2. Miss Emma keeps saying she does not want to be a “burden” on anybody and she does not want Grant to go to the prison if it is a “burden.” What is the subtext here?

Chapter 11

1. How does Jefferson’s reaction to the food Grant brings to the prison reflect his state of mind?

Chapter 19

1. Explain the significance of the Christmas play at the church. What does the sole gift under the tree signify? Who is the intended recipient? Why did so many people attend this event this year in comparison to years past?

Chapter 20

1. Describe the mood when Sheriff Guidry tells Grant and Reverend Ambrose about the date of Jefferson's execution.

Chapter 29

1. Describe the difference between the first-person narration in this chapter—the only one with a chapter title—and the first-person narration in the rest of the novel. How would you characterize the narrative tone? How does the shift in narrator affect readers?

2. In what ways does the “lesson” that Grant tries to teach Jefferson change him?

Chapter 30

1. How do the vignettes in this chapter build suspense as the novel proceeds to its inexorable conclusion?
