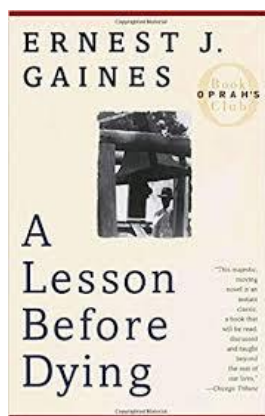


A Lesson Before Dying



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Author Gaines, Ernest

Publisher Vintage

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Genre Young adult, Realistic Fiction

Synopsis Two young black men, one condemned to death for a murder and the other a teacher, form a bond in a small Cajun Louisiana community in the late 1940s.

Themes Race, Mortality, Prejudice

Protagonist African American, Male

Note Over the years, these books have been published in multiple editions. The page numbers in your book may be different than the ones on the lesson plan.

More Information www.scu.edu/character



Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

A Lesson Before Dying, Day 1



Key Paragraph, p. 14

“Tante Lou, Miss Emma, Jefferson is dead. It is only a matter of weeks, maybe a couple of months—but he’s already dead. The past twenty-one years, we’ve done all we could for Jefferson. He’s dead now. And I can’t raise the dead. All I can do is try to keep others from ending up like this—but he’s gone from us. There’s nothing I can do anymore, nothing any of us can do anymore” (p. 14).

Writing Prompt

In this section of the novel, Grant says that there is nothing that anyone can do for Jefferson. He claims that Jefferson is already dead. Do you agree with this statement? Does the situation seem hopeless, or is there something that can be done?

Write 1-2 argumentative paragraphs in which you argue either for or against Grant’s claim. Do you believe that nothing can be done for Jefferson? Why or why not? Explain your reasoning with your own personal opinions, as well as facts and evidence from the novel. What do you think it will take for the townspeople of Bayonne to change their minds? Do you believe change is possible?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

A Lesson Before Dying, Day 2



Key Paragraph, p. 22

“That’s not what I come up here for, Mr. Henri,’ Miss Emma said to him. ‘I’m not begging for his life no more; that’s over. I just want see him die like a man. This family owe me that much, Mr. Henri. And I want it. I want somebody do something for me one time ‘fore I close my eyes. Somebody got do something for me one time ‘fore I close my eyes, Mr. Henri. Please, sir” (p. 22).

Writing Prompt

Jefferson’s defense attorney referred to his client as as ‘no more than a hog’ when he pleaded with the jury to save Jefferson’s life. Miss Emma is concerned that her godson will die and all that people will see when they look at Jefferson is a hog. What are the qualities that make you human?

In a 2-paragraph response, argue in favor of your own personal definition of a ‘human.’ In the first paragraph, explain what you think being human entails. What makes humans different from animals? In a second paragraph, argue why your definition is correct. What makes it a better definition than the one Jefferson’s defense attorney uses? Use examples from the text as well as your own personal opinions. Make sure to provide a counter-argument somewhere in your response. Conclude your second paragraph with a reiteration of your stance.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

A Lesson Before Dying, Day 3



Key Paragraph, p. 34

"I went out into the yard, slapping the Wescott ruler against my leg hard enough to sting it. The cool air felt good on my face, and after standing in the yard for a while, I walked to the road. But there was nothing to see out there but a couple of automobiles—my gray Ford parked down the quarter in front of my aunt's house, and a car parked alongside the ditch farther up the quarter. Other than that, all there was to see were old, gray weather-beaten houses, with smoke rising out of the chimneys and drifting across the corrugated tin roofs. Living and teaching on a plantation, you got to know the occupants of every house, and you knew who was home and who was not..." (p. 34).

Writing Prompt

Gaines, the author, provides a lot of details about the school and the Quarter in today's reading. Review today's key paragraph.

Then, write a paragraph arguing either for/against the following statement: the description of the school and the Quarter in today's reading is depressing. How do you feel when you read today's key passage? Why does it make you feel that way? What techniques does Gaines use to produce an emotion? Use examples from the text and be sure to provide a counterargument somewhere in your paragraph. Conclude your writing with a reiteration of your stance.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

A Lesson Before Dying, Day 4



Key Paragraph, p. 49

“I don’t like it,” Guidry said. ‘And I’ll tell you why I don’t like it. Because I think the only thing you can do is just aggravate him, trying to put something in his head against his will. And I’d rather see a contented hog go to that chair than an aggravated hog. It would be better for everybody concerned. There ain’t a thing you can put in that skull that ain’t there already” (p. 49).

Writing Prompt

Segregation was harmful to the psyches of both blacks and whites. It made whites view blacks as subhuman. And it made blacks struggle to believe in their own humanity. We know by his comments how Guidry feels about Jefferson. And we know by his actions how he feels about Grant.

Pretend you are Grant. **Write an argumentative paragraph about how you feel about Sheriff Guidry and other powerful white people in town; specifically argue that their attitudes and treatment towards you is unjust. Use at least one example from today’s text to back up your assertions. In your paragraph, provide several suggestions as to how these people can change their mindset. Remember, change requires a vision, a plan and effort. What are some visions, plans and efforts white townspeople can take towards becoming more tolerant? Conclude with a reiteration of your stance.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

A Lesson Before Dying, Day 5



Key Paragraph, p. 65

“...Well you will believe me one day. When you see that those five and a half months you spend in that church each year are just a waste of your time, you will. You will. You’ll see that it will take more than five and a half months to wipe away—peel—scrape away the blanket of ignorance that has been plastered and replastered over those brains in the past three hundred years. You’ll see” (p. 65).

Writing Prompt

In today’s reading, Grant remembers the words that his teacher Matthew Antoine tells him: “Do the best you can. But it won’t matter.” This quote goes against the notion that change requires effort. Antoine tells Grant that the only option for blacks in the south is to run away. How do you feel about this statement?

In an argumentative paragraph, make the claim that Matthew Antoine’s statement is false. Support the claim that people can change the world around them by using your own personal experience as well as evidence from the text. Also, think about someone in your own life who did their best and ended up making a positive impact on the world. Why is it better to believe in yourself rather than give up hope? Conclude your writing with a reiteration of your stance.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

A Lesson Before Dying, Day 6



Key Paragraph, p. 79

“Everything you sent me to school for, you’re stripping me of it,’ I told my aunt. They were looking at the fire, and I stood behind them with the bag of food. ‘The humiliation I had to go through, going into that man’s kitchen. The hours I had to wait while they ate and drank and socialized before they would even see me. Now going up to that jail. To watch them put their dirty hands on that food. To search my body each time as if I’m some kind of common criminal. Maybe today, they’ll want to look into my mouth or my nostrils, or make me strip. Anything to humiliate me. All the things you wanted me to escape by going to school. Years ago, Professor Antoine told me that if I stayed here, they were going to break me down to the n***** I was born to be. But he didn’t tell me that my aunt would help them to do it’” (p. 79).

Writing Prompt

Like Martin Luther King Jr., Grant had a dream. He dreamed that schooling would allow him a seat at King’s “table of brotherhood.”

Pretend you are Grant. **Write an argumentative speech in the style of Martin Luther King Jr., claiming that Jefferson has the right to sit at the ‘table of brotherhood’ with blacks and whites alike. Explain why you are passionate about this case and what it means to you to see equality between races. Identify the plan you have made to make this dream a reality. Support your evidence with information from the novel; you may also find that research into Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech is helpful in crafting your own argumentative speech. Conclude your speech with a reiteration of your stance. Be prepared to read your work aloud to the class.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

A Lesson Before Dying, Day 7



Key Paragraph, p. 84

“That man out there doesn’t want me up here either,’ I said to him. ‘He said I will never be able to make you understand anything. He said I’m just wasting my time coming up here now. But your nannan doesn’t think so. She wants me to come up here. She wants us to talk. What do you want? You want me to stay away and let him win? The white man? You want him to win?’” (p. 84).

Writing Prompt

In today’s reading, Grant states that he is going to lie to Miss Emma about Jefferson enjoying the food because he doesn’t want the white man to win. How do you feel about lying for a just cause? Is it ethical or unethical?

In an argumentative paragraph, claim that, if Jefferson were to die like a man – despite his being accused of being a hog – it would be a victory. In your paragraph, explain who the victory would belong to. Do you believe that Jefferson’s dying with dignity would make him a hero? Would he become a historical figure like Jackie Robinson or Joe Louis? Why or why not? Be sure to provide a counterargument in your paragraph. Conclude your paragraph with a reiteration of your stance.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

A Lesson Before Dying, Day 8



Key Paragraph, p. 107

“...Just before we came up the cemetery, we turned left on a road that would take us farther into the field. This was Vivian’s first time back here, and I told her that my people had worked these fields ever since slavery, and many of them were buried in the cemetery behind us...” (p. 107).

Please also read...

About the Author: The world into which Ernest James Gaines was born--on January 15, 1933--is essentially the world which he has distilled into the dense and complex world of his six novels and his stories. The land around River Lake Plantation--near New Roads, Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana--is the land around the Pichot plantation, near Bayonne, St. Raphael Parish, presented in *A Lesson Before Dying*. The black community in which Gaines grew up became "the quarter" of this 1993 novel, as well as providing the setting and social matrix of his previous works. The author's vision of Henri Pichot's cane fields stems directly from the fields in which Gaines himself worked as a child. As Gaines has said: "Though the places in my stories and novels are imaginary ones, they are based pretty much on the place where I grew up and the surrounding areas where I worked, went to school, and traveled as a child. My characters speak the way people speak in that area."

Gaines also has drawn considerably on the mores of black culture and the storytelling traditions of rural Louisiana. The result is prose that is at once exact, idiomatic, stately, and true to the spoken language of actual people.

Writing Prompt

Strong stories are often written by authors who write about what they know. Re-read the section above titled, "About the Author."

Write an argumentative paragraph in which you claim that Gaines based his novel on several instances in his own life. You may find that conducting further research on the author’s life to be helpful in constructing your claim. Which specific details of the novel are similar to Gaines’ own experience? Be sure to conclude your paragraph with a reiteration of your stance.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

A Lesson Before Dying, Day 9



Key Paragraph, p. 123

“‘What for?’ I said. ‘What for, Tante Lou? He treated me the same way he treated her. He wants me to feel guilty just the same as he wants her to feel guilty. Well I’m not feeling guilty, Tante Lou. I didn’t put him there. I do everything I know how to keep people like him from going there. He’s not going to make me feel guilty.’

‘You going back,’ she said. ‘You ain’t going to run away from this, Grant’” (p. 123).

Writing Prompt

Imagine you are Vivian. Pretend that Grant has come to you for advice after the argument with Tante Lou. **Write an argumentative letter to him, claiming that it is important that he stay and live up to his responsibilities. Include language and phrases that the Vivian might use when addressing Grant. What does he need to do to help Jefferson find his humanity and his dignity? How can you change his mind with your words? Remember that change is possible: it requires a vision, a plan and effort. Conclude your letter with a reiteration of your stance.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

A Lesson Before Dying, Day 10



Key Paragraph, p. 129

“I don’t know when I’m going to die, Jefferson. Maybe tomorrow, maybe next week, maybe today. That’s why I try to live as well as I can every day and not hurt people. Especially people who have sacrificed for me. I don’t want to hurt those people. I want to help those people as much as I can” (p. 129).

Writing Prompt

Do you believe that Grant is telling the truth in the paragraph above? Take a stand one way or the other and **write an argumentative paragraph claiming that he is either telling the truth or lying. Use information you have learned about Grant by reading the book thus far to build your argument. Try to use at least one direct quotation. (HINT: You may also want to review the character trait sheet you created today.)** What are some clues to help you support your claim? Do you personally agree with his statement? Provide a counterargument in your paragraph. Conclude your paragraph with a reiteration of your stance.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

A Lesson Before Dying, Day 11



Key Paragraph, p. 151

“She was right; I was not happy. I had heard the same carols all my life, seen the same little play, with the same mistakes in grammar. The minister had offered the same prayer as always, Christmas or Sunday. The same people wore the same old clothes and sat in the same places. Next year it would be the same, and the year after that, the same again. Vivian said things were changing. But were they changing?” (p. 151).

Compare the previous paragraph with this one

“People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in” – Rosa Parks

Writing Prompt

Change in society is often forced. It takes a vision and a plan. **Write an argumentative paragraph in which you list the things that need to change in Bayonne. Use today's reading as well as that of previous days to support your claims. Then, in a second paragraph, argue that Grant and Rosa Parks are not as different as they may seem at first. Use the key paragraphs from today as evidence to support your claims. How can Grant learn from Rosa in order to implement change? Make sure to provide a counterargument in your paragraphs.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

A Lesson Before Dying, Day 12



Key Paragraph, p. 157

"Twelve white men say a black man must die, and another white man sets the date and time without consulting one black person. Justice?" (p. 157).

Compare quote above with description of the Emmett Till case below.

On August 28, 1955, Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African-American youth who was on a summer vacation from his home on Chicago's south side, was kidnapped from his uncle's home in LeFlore County, Miss. by two white men. Four days later, Till's badly beaten body was recovered from the Tallahatchie River. A 75-pound cotton gin fan was attached with barbed wire to his neck.

Till had allegedly entered a grocery store, bought some bubble gum, and whistled at a white woman who worked there. The woman's husband and his half-brother kidnapped and killed Till. As one put it, "I just decided it was time a few people got put on notice." An all-white jury acquitted the two men in an hour and seven minutes. One juror commented, "If we hadn't stopped to drink a pop, it wouldn't have taken that long."

Writing Prompt

Use today's reading and the history of Emmett Till to explain how the Justice system of Segregated America was in need of change. **Write an argumentative paragraph in which you claim that justice was not present in either of the cases. Provide evidence and facts/quotes to support this claim (you may find it helpful to conduct research using authoritative print or digital sources). Then, consider how Jefferson might stand to be an agent of justice and change by going to the electric chair with dignity.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

A Lesson Before Dying, Day 13



Key Paragraph, p. 174

“‘Here.’

It was the kind of ‘here’ your mother or your big sister or your great-aunt or your grandmother would have said. It was the kind of ‘here’ that let you know this was hard-earned money but also, that you needed it more than she did, and the other kind of ‘here’ that said she wished you had it and didn’t have to borrow it from her, but since you did not have it, and she did, then ‘here’ it was, with a kind of love. It was the kind of ‘here’ that asked the question, when will all this end? When will a man not have to struggle to have money to get what he needs ‘here’? When will a man be able to live without having to kill another man ‘here’?” (p. 174).

Writing Prompt

In the quotation above, Gaines explains the many levels of meaning in the word, “here,” when said by Thelma Claiborne. This ‘here’ is related to subtext; remember that subtext is the meaning beneath dialogue – it is what the speaker really means.

First, write a informative paragraph which you first describe a time in which someone said a word or phrase to you that displayed their true, unsaid feelings. Next, write an argumentative paragraph in which you claim that there was a hidden meaning behind their words. What was the subtext? What were the speaker’s true feelings behind what they said? Use personal experience to support your claims. Give background details to make your paragraphs as concise and clear as possible. Be sure to conclude your second paragraph with a reiteration of your claim.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

A Lesson Before Dying, Day 14



Key Paragraph, p. 191

“That is not a hero. A hero does for others. He would do anything for people he loves, because he knows it would make their lives better. I am not that kind of person, but I want you to be. You could give something to her, to me, to those children in the quarter. You could give them something that I never could. They expect it from me, but not from you. The white people out there are saying that you don’t have it—that you’re a hog, not a man. But I know they are wrong. You have the potential. We all have, no matter who we are.

‘Those out there are no better than we are, Jefferson. They are worse. That’s why they are always looking for a scapegoat, someone else to blame. I want you to show them the difference between what they think you are and what you can be. To them you are nothing but another n*****--no dignity, no heart, no love for your people. You can prove them wrong. You can do more than I can ever do’” (p. 191).

Writing Prompt

Write an argumentative paragraph in which you claim that someone you know is a hero. Do they possess the traits that Grant outlines in today’s key paragraph? You might wish to choose a historical figure we have studied to compare your hero with, such as Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., Emmett Till, Jackie Robinson, or Joe Louis. Be sure to explain how he or she fits the definition of a hero as laid out by Grant. Also, conclude with a reiteration of your stance.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

A Lesson Before Dying, Day 15



Key Paragraph, p. 199

“...Since emancipation, almost a hundred years ago, they would do any kind of work they could find to keep from working side by side in the field with the n*****. They controlled most of the bricklaying business in this part of the state. Even took that kind of work from the white boys, because they would do it so much cheaper than the white boys would. Anything not to work alongside the n*****...Dumb as hell, but prejudiced as hell. They had no other place to go to do their drinking—they would not dare go to any of the white clubs—so they would come here and bring their prejudiced attitudes with them. They would keep it down when there were several blacks in the place, but with only me and the three old men standing at the bar today, they felt pretty safe” (p. 199).

Writing Prompt

These young bricklayers have bought into the myth of white supremacy. **Write an argumentative paragraph in which you claim that the laws of segregation have led these young bricklayers to believe that they are superior to darker-skinned people. Use examples from the text to support your claims. You may find that conducting research into segregation during the 1950's and 60's is helpful in providing information that backs up your stance. Make sure to provide a counterargument. Conclude your assignment with a reiteration of your stance.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

A Lesson Before Dying, Day 16



Key Paragraph, p. 215

“I went to college.”

‘But what did you learn?’

‘To teach reading, writing, and arithmetic, Reverend.’

‘What did you learn about your own people? What did you learn about her—her ‘round there?’ he said, gesturing toward the other room and trying to keep his voice down.

‘No, you not educated, boy,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘You far from being educated. You learned your reading, writing, and ‘rithmetic, but you don’t know nothing. You don’t even know yourself. Well?’

‘You’re doing the talking, Reverend.’

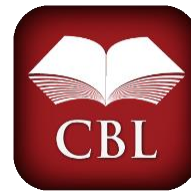
‘An educated, boy,’ he said, thumping his chest. ‘I’m the one that’s educated. I know people like you look down on people like me, but’—he touched his chest again—‘I’m the one that’s educated’” (p. 215).

Writing Prompt

The Reverend has never been to college. He claims to know people and therefore be educated. Grant has been to college, where he learned to teach reading, writing and arithmetic. Which type of education do you feel is more valuable for instituting change? **Write an argumentative paragraph in which you claim that either Grant or the Reverend is more educated. Back up your claim with evidence from the text as well as your own personal opinion. Which type of education is more important to helping Jefferson? (Are either related to selfishness, self-centeredness, or selflessness?) Provide a counterargument, and be sure to conclude with a reiteration of your stance.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

A Lesson Before Dying, Day 17



Key Paragraph, p. 222

“You’ve never had any possessions to give up, Jefferson. But there is something greater than possessions—and that is love. I know you love her and would do anything for her. Didn’t you eat the gumbo when you weren’t hungry, just to please her? That’s all we’re asking now, Jefferson—do something to please her” (p. 222).

A description of Rosa Parks and the beginning of the civil rights movement.

It was the symbolic beginning of the modern civil rights movement. Rosa Parks, an Alabama seamstress, refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus to a white man. A volunteer secretary for the Montgomery branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and a veteran of the civil rights movement since the early 1930s, she was returning from work at a department store on Dec. 1, 1955. The bus filled up, whites in the front and blacks in the back. The driver ordered four blacks in the front of the black section to get up and make room for whites. Three did, but Mrs. Parks did not. She was arrested under a city ordinance requiring segregated buses and fined \$10 plus \$4 court costs.

At the time that she refused to give up her seat, only 31 African Americans in Montgomery were registered to vote. But her act of defiance shook the foundations of segregation.

...In later life, her views ranged between the non-violence of Martin Luther King and the militance of Malcolm X. "I don't believe in gradualism," she told an interviewer, "or that whatever is to be done for the better should take forever to do." By holding on to her seat, Rosa Parks illustrates how one person's spontaneous act of courage and defiance can alter the course of history.

Writing Prompt

It has been said that Miss Emma represents the Rosa Parks of fictional Bayonne. As Rosa Parks becomes the catalyst for the modern civil rights movement, Miss Emma is the catalyst for change in Bayonne.

Do you personally believe that Miss Emma represents Rosa Parks? Why or why not? **Write an argumentative paragraph that claims either for or against this comparison. Be sure to use what you know from *A Lesson Before Dying* and the excerpt about Rosa Parks above. Be sure to reference both texts. Provide a counterargument somewhere in your paragraph, and make sure you conclude your paragraph with a reiteration of your stance.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

A Lesson Before Dying, Day 18



Key Paragraph, p. 245

“...Sidney drove the six blocks in Lucy’s car, and as he was approaching the store he saw a crowd of people standing on the sidewalk, facing the courthouse. Parked beside the courthouse was the same truck that Sidney had seen at eight o’clock that morning. The tarpaulin had been rolled back, and two men sat at the tail end of the truck, talking and smoking cigarettes” (p. 245).

Writing Prompt

In today’s reading, Gaines, the author, gives an Afrocentric account of the preparations for the execution. We learn about the daily lives of local people as the truck with the chair arrives. We learn of people’s last interactions with Jefferson, either knowingly or unknowingly.

Was Gaines’ approach to tell the story from different perspectives effective?

Write an argumentative paragraph either for or against this style of writing. Did it help you gain a sense of the mood on Bayonne leading up to the execution? Or would you have preferred Gaines to stick to telling the story focusing on Grant’s actions and feelings? Why or why not? Be sure to provide evidence from the text to support your argument.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

A Lesson Before Dying, Day 19



Key Paragraph, p. 253

“Paul and I started walking down the quarter. We were both quiet. I waited for him to begin.

‘It went as well as it could have gone.’ He spoke slowly as we walked abreast, he kept looking ahead, I down at the ground. ‘There was no trouble. He was a little shaky—but no trouble.’

Paul was quiet a moment, then suddenly he stopped walking. After going another step, I stopped too, and looked back at him.

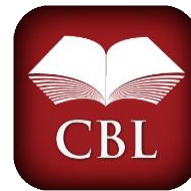
‘He was the strongest man in that crowded room, Grant Wiggins...and straight he walked. I’m a witness. Straight he walked’” (p. 253).

Writing Prompt

Complete the editorial you began for Paul. **Write at least 2 argumentative paragraphs from Paul’s point of view. Be sure to use words or phrases you think this characters would use. Tell how you got to know Jefferson. Tell how it made you feel to see him walk tall. Tell how important it was for you to bear witness. Tell how Jefferson’s death will affect you. Make sure that your editorial is argumentative: take a stand on the execution and be sure to use evidence from the novel to support your claims.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

A Lesson Before Dying, Day 20



Optional Final Essay:

Write a five or more paragraph essay taking a stance on life in the South after emancipation and prior to the civil rights movement. Use what you learned in *A Lesson Before Dying* to develop an argumentative thesis (essay's topic sentence). Support your thesis with information you collected while reading or from research derived from authoritative print sources. Information also might come from the book. You could also obtain information from the KWL and Venn Diagram charts you developed as a class. Further information may be drawn from historical information provided by your teacher on such topics as segregation, Jim Crow, Earnest Gaines, Rosa Parks, Emmett Till, Jackie Robinson, and Joe Louis.

Your essay must have an introductory paragraph, a body, and a conclusion that restates your position on the topic you chose. It should include references to the text, events and characters. You should include quotations, when necessary, to support your claims. Make sure your tone is formal. Also, a counterargument is not required, but would be helpful in developing your stance on the topic you wish to address.