

A Lesson Before Dying Handout By Mary Petersen, Kyla Kurosawa, and Kayla Moreira



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In Ernest J. Gaines's, "A Lesson Before Dying", the style remains subtle but lies in plain view for the reader. Gaines takes an educated realist and peers through his eyes to narrate the story through him. Grant Wiggins is a main character and the narrator in "A Lesson Before Dying" and serves a purpose greater than Jefferson's teacher. Throughout the novel frivolous language is rarely seen as the raw and disheartening truths of the story are focused on.

Grant is one of the few educated black men to have existed in his community.

The purpose of Grant's education is for it to be utilized in his narration. The precise, concise, and blunt words that flow from Grant leave no extraneous elements for the reader to focus on. The style Gaines creates proposes an atmosphere of

contemplation and thoughtfulness as a disturbing yet majestic story is presented to the reader.



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<https://www.timetoast.com/timelines/a-lesson-before-dying-538cc946-4d02-4b27-8690-04fc97e8dfda>

Dehumanization is undeniably one of the most prevalent themes in "A Lesson Before Dying". Jefferson, an uneducated 21 year old black man convicted for a crime he only witnessed, is whittled down to a "hog" by his defendant and later many others. The black community is already treated as a group of lesser life forms than any white man or woman. To have a young man's reputation shredded down to that of a savage animal is unjust and easily believed



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<https://tribune.com.pk/story/377831/us-jury-convicts-ma-n-of-murdering-singer-hudsons-family-members/>

by any member of the white community. This is exactly what Gaines was trying to communicate as he implemented this theme in such a major way. Time and time again Jefferson is referred to by others, and himself, as a savage and a fool. His defender in court implores the jury to study him, leaving a false inference of Jefferson's character to be repeated and treated as the gospel. "Do you see a man sitting here? Look at the shape of his skull, this face as flat as the palm of my hand-look deeply into those eyes. Do you see a modicum of intelligence?" (Page 7, Jefferson's defense to the jury). This scene brought forth all modes of dehumanization throughout the novel.

In conclusion, Gaines perfected the morbid and bone chilling reality of the situation with themes of dehumanization and styles involving little emotion to keep the focus point on the inescapable future of the characters.

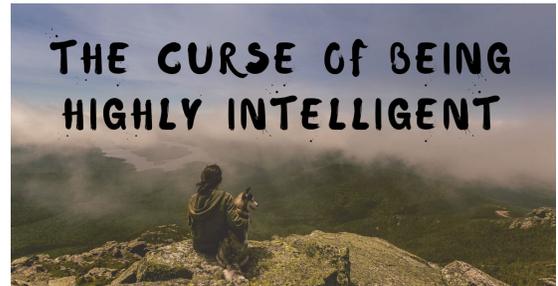


*Borrowed from Give Racism the Red Card*

In *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest J. Gaines, racism permeates the narrative with constant subtle, and sometimes even blatant reminders of prejudice against people of a different color. Set in the south during the 1940s, racism makes no attempt to hide itself. The first scene in the book includes the defense calling Jefferson “a thing that acts on command. A thing to hold the handle of a plow, a thing to load your bales of cotton, a

thing... (pg. 7)” The story that follows the court case is built upon the decision the final court had made to charge Jefferson with murder despite his innocence because of their racial bias and racism continues to influence and invade Grant’s narrative throughout the story.

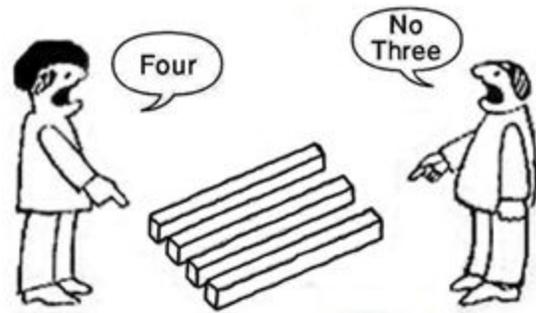
Gaines slowly suffocates the audience with a barrage of microaggressions and references to racism until it is dreadfully obvious, even in more passive-aggressive situations, how prominently racial bias affects the characters in nearly every interaction. This racism separates Grant from the white community, and his level of education and atheism separates him from the black community. As Carl Senna of the *New York Times* notes, “The social distance between... Grant and Jefferson appears as great as that between the races.” This separation between Grant and others is evident in style, because Grant speaks very formally and with perfect grammar, whereas most other characters speak in southern slang, their accents shown in their words being spelled as they’re pronounced, such as “yer” instead of “hear,” and “Go’n” instead of “going to.” It’s also displayed in the character’s interactions. For example, when Grant goes to ask Sheriff Guidry for visitation rights to Jefferson, he is forced to enter through the backdoor like a servant, wait for an audience, and carefully measure his words so as not to seem too intelligent and a threat to the white man. Guidry even tells him, when Grant uses the correct “doesn’t” instead of “don’t,” “You’re smart. Maybe... too smart for your own good (pg. 49).” These microaggressions are seen throughout the book with several other characters, as well, and not just white ones. Reverend Ambrose calls Grant “boy,” an old-fashioned term used by white farmers to call their adult slaves to belittle them, and Vivian’s family disapproves of Grant based on his darker skin tone. The character interactions and each character’s style of speaking highlight the differences between them and Grant.



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In the novel, "A Lesson Before Dying" there are many themes and styles used by the author, Ernest Gaines. One of the styles explored was the use of perspective. The story stayed with the main character, Grant, through the majority of the book, but in chapter 29, it switched to Jefferson. Jefferson is the young man the whole book basically revolves around. In Jefferson's chapter, we see the struggles he is going through that we weren't able to see at all in the rest of the book. We, the reader, puts on a fresh pair of goggles to see the hardships Jefferson goes through and the challenges he faces with accepting his death.

Through Grant's perspective, the audience is able to perceive the pain and the resent Grant felt by having to teach Jefferson. This allows the reader to see how Grant's relationship with everyone in his life has an effect on him and how the situation Jefferson is going through has an impact on everyone, even a seemingly cynical man.



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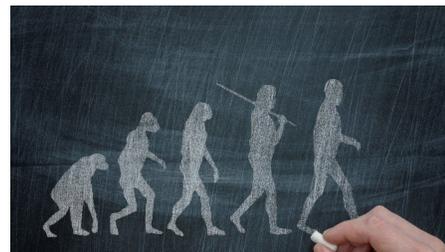


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An important theme throughout the book was that of personal journey. Both Grant and Jefferson went through a tremendous expedition, from not exactly knowing who they are to finding out a deeper meaning to life and their place in it. Though Jefferson's time was short, we were able to really see how he felt about himself both with the perspective of Grant and the small perspective of Jefferson the audience is able to see. Grant's view on the issue

allows the reader to see how Jefferson outwardly presents himself and feels about himself, but with "Jefferson's Diary" we get an inside look at Jefferson which made the novel very emotional.

The differing perspectives of Grant and Jefferson give the audience a look at the effects an execution has on the community and the person being executed. Through Grant's perspective, we are able to see the surrounding community via him since he fits in with most groups in the community, and with Jefferson's perspective, we are able to see how he acts and how he actually feels about what is happening. This not only provides a very emotional account of the event, but also allows the reader to see the growth in Jefferson from a "hog" to a man.



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## Works Cited

Senna, Carl. "Dying Like a Man." Review of *A Lesson Before Dying*. *New York Times*, 8 Aug. 1993.

Gaines, Ernest J., and Attica Locke. *A Lesson before Dying*. Serpent's Tail, 2015.