

## Olentangy Local School District Literature Selection Review

Teacher:	Lesley Wolf	School:	Hyatts
Book Title:	A Lesson Before Dying	Genre:	Fiction
Author:	Ernest J. Gaines	Pages:	272
Publisher:	Knopf Publishing Group	Copyright:	1997

*In a brief rationale, please provide the following information relative to the book you would like added to the school's book collection for classroom use. You may attach additional pages as needed.*

**Book Summary and summary citation:** (suggested resources include book flap summaries, review summaries from publisher, book vendors, etc.)

In a small Cajun community in 1940s Louisiana, a young black man is about to go to the electric chair for murder. A white shopkeeper had died during a robbery gone bad; though the young man on trial had not been armed and had not pulled the trigger, in that time and place, there could be no doubt of the verdict or the penalty.

"I was not there, yet I was there. No, I did not go to the trial, I did not hear the verdict, because I knew all the time what it would be..." So begins Grant Wiggins, the narrator of Ernest J. Gaines's powerful exploration of race, injustice, and resistance, *A Lesson Before Dying*. If young Jefferson, the accused, is confined by the law to an iron-barred cell, Grant Wiggins is no less a prisoner of social convention. University educated, Grant has returned to the tiny plantation town of his youth, where the only job available to him is teaching in the small plantation church school. More than 75 years after the close of the Civil War, antebellum attitudes still prevail: African Americans go to the kitchen door when visiting whites and the two races are rigidly separated by custom and by law. Grant, trapped in a career he doesn't enjoy, eaten up by resentment at his station in life, and angered by the injustice he sees all around him, dreams of taking his girlfriend Vivian and leaving Louisiana forever. But when Jefferson is convicted and sentenced to die, his grandmother, Miss Emma, begs Grant for one last favor: to teach her grandson to die like a man.

As Grant struggles to impart a sense of pride to Jefferson before he must face his death, he learns an important lesson as well: heroism is not always expressed through action--sometimes the simple act of resisting the inevitable is enough. Populated by strong, unforgettable characters, Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* offers a lesson for a lifetime.

**Provide an instructional rationale for the use of this title, including specific reference to the OLSD curriculum map(s):** (Curriculum maps may be referenced by grade/course and indicator number or curriculum maps with indicators highlighted may be attached to this form)

10. Examine author's purpose and style.

13. Analyze plot, character, theme, point of view and setting in varied genres.

6. Write responses to literature that organize an insightful interpretation around several clear ideas, premises or images that support judgments with specific references to the original text, to other texts, authors and/or to prior knowledge.

**Include two professional reviews of this title:** (a suggested list of resources for identifying professional reviews is shown below. Reviews may be "cut and pasted" (with citation) into the form or printed reviews may be attached to the form)

Review #1

From School Library Journal: No breathless courtroom triumphs or dramatic reprieves alleviate the sad progress toward execution in this latest novel by the author of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (Bantam, 1982). The condemned man is Jefferson, a poorly educated man/child whose only crimes are a dim intelligence, being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and being black in rural Louisiana in the late 1940s. To everyone, even his own defense attorney, he's an animal, too dumb to understand what is happening to him. But his godmother, Miss Emma, decides that Jefferson will die a man. To accomplish just that, she brings Grant Wiggins, the teacher at the plantation's one-room school and narrator of the novel, into the story. Emotionally blackmailed by two strong-willed old ladies, Grant reluctantly begins visiting Jefferson, committing both men to the painful task of self-discovery. As in his earlier novels, Gaines evokes a sense of reality through rich detail and believable characters in this simple, moving story. YAs who seek thought-provoking reading will enjoy this glimpse of life in the rural South just before the civil rights movement.

Review #2

From Library Journal: What do you tell an innocent youth who was at the wrong place at the wrong time and now faces death in the electric chair? What do you say to restore his self-esteem when his lawyer has publicly described him as a dumb animal? What do you tell a youth humiliated by a lifetime of racism so that he can face death with dignity? The task belongs to Grant Wiggins, the teacher of the Negro plantation school who narrates the story. Grant grew up on the Louisiana plantation but broke away to go to the university. He returns to help his people but struggles over "whether I should act like the teacher that I was, or like the nigger that I was supposed to be." The powerful message Grant tells the youth transforms him from a "hog" to a hero, and the reader is not likely to forget it, either.

**What alternate text(s) could also fulfill the instructional requirements?**

Title: **The Glass Menagerie**

Author: **Tennessee Williams, Robert  
Bray**

Title: **Ellen Foster**

Author: **Kaye Gibbons**

Title: **The Great Gatsby**

Author: **F. Scott Fitzgerald**

Title:

Author:

Title:

Author:

Title:

Author:

**Document any potentially controversial content:**

Multiple uses of the word "nigger", "shit", "ass" as used in context with the setting of the book

**Keeping in mind the age, academic level, and maturity of the intended reader, what is the suggested classroom use: (check all that apply)**

Gifted/Accelerated  Regular  At Risk

**GRADE LEVEL(S):** 6  7  8  9  10  11  12

**Reading level of this title (if applicable):** Grade 8

**Date Submitted to Department Chair:** 11-27-07

**Suggested Professional Literary Review Sources:**

School Library Journal

Horn Book

Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books

VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates)

Library Journal

Book Links

Publisher's Weekly

Booklist

Kirkus Review

Wilson Library Catalog

English Journal (and other resources of the National Council of Teachers of English)

The Reading Teacher (International Reading Association)

Literature for Today's Young Adults