

*A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest J. Gaines

**Context:** *A Lesson Before Dying* was written by Ernest J. Gaines in 1993 and is set in a rural Cajun community in Louisiana in the 1940's. The book begins with a Black man named Jefferson being caught in the wrong place at the wrong time and being accused of murder. Jefferson is sentenced to death despite being innocent. The narrator and protagonist of the story, Grant Wiggins, is the only Black man with a college education in their neighborhood. His aunt, along with Jefferson's godmother, convince him to meet with Jefferson weekly to teach him he's a man before going to the chair. Grant reluctantly agrees, feeling a share in the burden of guilt on Jefferson's life.

**Discussion Questions about Writing/Style:**

1. What role does the point of view play in this book? In what major ways would the story change if the perspective was not from Wiggins?
2. How is the dehumanization of Jefferson depicted and extended throughout the story? How is it combatted and subverted?
3. Gaines uses irony in a number of ways, from the title of the book to the central message of the story and beyond. What are some examples of this irony, and how does Gaines use these to help further the reader's understanding of the text?

**Discussion Questions about Themes:**

1. Grant regularly worries about the perpetuity and extension of pernicious cycles in the lives of Black Americans in the American South. How does he deal with this worry? Does he combat the cycle, succumb to the cycle, or something else entirely?
2. Connected to this cycle, Grant has a complicated relationship with both the past and the future. How does Grant reckon with destroying unjust or demeaning elements of the past while preserving what good may have survived?
3. Despite being the victim of a terrible injustice, how does Jefferson come to transform into a symbol of hope and freedom for the Black residents of Bayonne?

**Personal Reflection Questions:**

1. If you were in Grant's shoes, how would you handle your initial meetings with Jefferson? What would you do differently? Why?
2. When is it okay to defy a law or rule in pursuit of something greater? Is civil disobedience something that should be condemned or celebrated?
3. What can you as an individual learn from Grant and Jefferson's meetings? What lessons do you take from this book?