***A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest Gaines**

**Chapter Discussion**

**Questions**

**Chapters 1-3**

1. POINT OF VIEW: Who is the narrator? What point of view does this display? How

might the first line (“I WAS NOT THERE, yet I was there.”) impact the reliability of the

narrator? Why does Ernest Gaines begin the novel with Jefferson’s trial, verdict, and

sentencing, but without providing the specific names of any of those involved?

2. SETTING: When and where does the story take place? How is the social world of

the novel structured? How does Gaines establish the unchanging ways of the two

communities? In Chapter 3, Grant notices that some things in Pichot’s house have

changed since he was last there as a boy, and that some things have not changed.

What has changed and what has not? Does Grant’s observation take in material

objects only?

3. METAPHOR: To what is Jefferson compared? What is the context of this

comparison? What is the purpose and effect? How does Grant factor into this

situation? What is Grant’s attitude toward it?

**Chapters 4-7**

1. CHARACTERIZATION: How would you characterize Grant’s approach to and the

treatment of his students? How does he feel about his profession? his life? visiting

Jefferson?

2. CONFLICT: What conflicts (both internal and external) are at work in the novel?

Give several specific examples of each. How do they provide a context for, or shape

the decisions and actions of, the characters?

3. SETTING: In Chapter 6, why does Pichot keep Grant waiting for “nearly two and a

half hours”? Why does Grant wait? What does this scene reveal about the

relationships among blacks and whites in Louisiana, the South, and the nation in the

late 1940s?

4. FIGUARTIVE LANGUAGE: A DOUBLE ENTENDRE is a figure of speech in which

a spoken phrase can be understood in two ways: one literal/ innocent and the second

ironic. What example is found in Chapter 7? What are the two meanings?

**Chapters 8-10**

1. CHARACTERIZATION: Describe the first visit to see Jefferson. What is Jefferson’s

tone? What are his first words to them? Where have you heard this previously? How

does Grant feel about having to visit Jefferson alone? Why does he feel this way?

2. THEME: What are the full meaning and implications of “the burden,” which Grant

recalls as being passed from Matthew Antoine to himself? How are the related themes

of past-and-present and stasis-and-change conveyed in the actions and thoughts of

the characters? For example, in Chapter 8, Grant watches the sixth-grade boys saw

and split wood and recalls his own experiences as a student. What do his description

and memories reveal about his own character and about life in the quarter over the

years? Give other specific examples of these two related themes.

**Chapters 11-14**

1. CHARACTERIZATION: At the end of Chapter 12, Vivian offers to Grant an

explanation of his not “running away.” Is her explanation just? What does her

explanation reveal about her and about her understanding of Grant and of his

situation?

2. CONFLICT: What is the nature of the conflict between Grant and Reverend

Ambrose? Describe Grant’s struggle with religion. What is Vivian’s take on his faith?

3. FLASHBACK: In several instances, as at the beginning of Chapter 13, the narrative

jumps ahead in time and Grant relates events or episodes in flashback. Why are these

events and episodes not presented directly as part of the ongoing narrative?

**Chapters 15-21**

1. IMAGERY: On the very first page Miss Emma is likened to “a great stone” and “one

of our oak or cypress stumps” and in Chapter 15 Tante Lou is likened to “a boulder in

the road.” What do these and other instances of strongly rooted or anchored earth

elements tell us about these two women?

2. SYMBOLISM: Upon leaving Pichot’s house after discussing Jefferson’s impending

execution, Grant says to Reverend Ambrose, “I’m going for a walk, along walk in the

opposite direction”. Where does this walk take him, actually and symbolically?

3. MOTIF: At the end of Chapter 21, Grant tries to explain to Vivian what the women in

the Quarter want from him. What motif does this explanation further? What are other

examples of this motif?

4. THEME: In Chapter 17, both Paul and Grant say that they will do their duty in

respect to Jefferson. Is the importance of doing one’s duty a dominant theme of the

novel? Does each of the other main characters have a clear notion of his or her duty?

5. IRONY: What is ironic about the conversation between Vivian and Grant at the end

of Chapter 18? To what and whom is Vivian referring? What are specific examples of

these changes?

**Chapters 22-24**

1. MOTIF: Is Grant a hero, according to the definition he gives Jefferson in Chapter

24? Is Jefferson a hero? Do any of the other characters qualify as heroes according to

Grant’s definition? Grant explains to Jefferson a “myth” that continues to determine life

in their community. What is that “myth”? Are there references to it or instances of its

operation elsewhere in the novel?

2. CONFLICT: What are the terms and implications of the conflict between what

Jefferson wants before he dies and what each of the others wants for and of him? How

is this conflict related to the novel’s other dominant conflicts?

3. SYMBOLISM: What does the radio mean for Jefferson and for Grant? Why do

Reverend Ambrose and Tante Lou make such an issue of it? What is the radio’s

significance within the larger context of the novel’s action?

4. THEME: In Chapter 22, Grant notes that Jefferson looks at him “with an inner

calmness now.” What are the causes and implications of that inner calmness? What is

the significance of the way Paul treats Grant at the beginning of Chapter 22? Compare

to Paul’s interaction with Grant in Chapter 17 (exactly halfway through the novel), such

as introducing himself to Grant by his full name. What theme do these support?

**Chapters 25-26**

1. SYMBOLISM: What is the significance of the name The

Rainbow Club? What events support this symbol? Why did Grant start the fight? What

does Vivian mean when she says, “That’s how you all get yourselves killed” (Ch. 26).

**Chapters27-28**

1. MOTIVATION: In Chapter 28, Jefferson asks Grant a series of questions. What is

the importance of these questions and of Jefferson’s posing them at this point in the

novel? Do these questions have any answers?

2. CONFLICT: In Chapter 27, what does the conversation between Reverend Ambrose

and Grant reveal about each and about the lives of their people? Are Reverend

Ambrose’s accusations true and just? Is he justified in lying to his congregation, as he

admits he has done over the years? What levels of meaning and importance are

established in this dialogue? What are Jefferson’s final spoken words to Grant

(Chapter 28)? What is his motivation for saying this? What is the full impact of the

statement?

3. IMAGERY: How, in what contexts, and in association with which characters, does

Gaines make use of images of the Messiah or savior? Are these images always

connected specifically with Christ or are they presented in more general terms?

Explain.

**Chapters 29-31**

1. POINT OF VIEW: Chapters 29 and 30 constitute the two instances in which material

is presented from points of view other than Grant’s. Why does Gaines move away from

Grant’s point of view in these two chapters before the final one? Why does Gaines

present the action on the morning of Jefferson’s execution day from multiple points of

view? What effect does this have?

2. MOTIF: To which character or characters does the “lesson” of the novel’s title

apply? Does more than one lesson emerge in the course of the novel? What does

Grant learn—and with what effect on his outlook and sense of himself—about himself

and others, about his community, about the nature of belief, and about the possibilities

for change and improvement?

3. IRONY: What ironies are implicit in the fact that the uneducated, deprived, barely

literate, condemned victim becomes the focus of the dreams, aspirations, and desires

of all the other characters?

4. SYMBOLISM: In Chapter 30 when Paul goes to get Jefferson, what is mentioned

about the radio? What does this symbolize? After Jefferson’s execution, what happens

to his notebook? (Chapter 31) What does it symbolize? What does Paul’s interaction in

and reaction to Jefferson’s death and his interaction with Grant symbolize? What is

symbolic about the butterfly and Grant’s reaction to it?

5. THEME: What do Jefferson’s diary entries (Chapter 29) reveal about him, before

and after his trial, and about his understanding of his and his fellow blacks’ lives and

their relationships with whites, and of his own fate? What theme does this chapter

summarize?