

## Approved for use in all English II classes

### Summary of the Work:

"Grant Wiggins, the first member of his family to attend university, has returned to his hometown of Bayonne, Louisiana, to teach in the plantation school. When a former student, a simple-minded young man named Jefferson, is sentenced to die after getting mixed up with some bad company that killed a white shopkeeper but were killed themselves in the gun battle, the doomed boy's mother asks Wiggins to visit the kid in jail and make him realize he's not just an animal but a man, before he dies. Wiggins does not want this task, but his aunt Lou, with whom he lives, insists. The teacher has to negotiate the gauntlet between suspicious, unsympathetic white jailers and an unresponsive, ungrateful "pupil." This beautiful, heartfelt novel skillfully brings to life a time and a place, and depicts the subtleties and hypocrisies of race relations, the limits and consolations of faith, and the emotional process of putting a man to death." **David Loftus, Ernest J. Gaines Resident Scholar**

### Rationale:

*A Lesson Before Dying* is about the ways in which people insist on declaring the value of their lives in a time and place in which those lives count for nothing. It is about the ways in which the imprisoned may find freedom even in the moment of their death. As such, Gaines's novel transcends its minutely evoked circumstances to address the basic predicament of what it is to be a human being, a creature striving for dignity in a universe that often denies it. Vintage Books  
<<http://www.randomhouse.com/vintage/read/lesson/>>

### Professional Reviews and/or Critical Essays:

\*Bawer, Bruce, "Bookshelf: Race, Justice, and Integrity in the Old South", in *The Wall Street Journal*, July 26, 1993, p. A9.

\*Chandra, Jane, "A review of *A Lesson Before Dying*", in *Voice of Youth Advocates*, vol. 16, no. 4, October 1993, p. 216.

\*Crowe, Chris E., "A review of *A Lesson Before Dying*", in *Kliatt*, vol. 28, no. 6, November 1994, pp. 8-9.

\*Folks, Jeffrey J., "Communal Responsibility in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*", in *The Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 52, Spring 1999, p. 259.

\*Gecan, Carolyn E., "A review of *A Lesson Before Dying*", in *School Library Journal*, vol. 39, no. 7, pp. 110-1.

### Notes on the Text:

*(The best way to evaluate and understand a novel is to personally read the book in its entirety.)*

"...Ernest Gaines, in *A Lesson Before Dying*, has developed a discourse on liberty and the inalienable rights of human beings, race notwithstanding. Of what it means to be human. Applicable to Cincinnati, the book explicates the need for justice without prejudice, favoritism, or fraud. It underscores the requirement for ethical public and judiciary administration of what is just, indispensable to a society of laws and extinguishing boycott." **Merelyn Bates-Mims, East Walnut Hills**

### Noted Distinction:

Notable/Best Books (A.L.A.)  
School Library Journal  
Pulitzer Prize nomination  
National Book Critics Award  
Southern Book Award

### Readability:

- Lexile Score: 750
- Readability Level: 7.5

### Learning Resources Guidelines:

- The novel meets the Learning Resources Guidelines.

### Standard Alignment: [\(link\)](#)

### Approval:

Submitted to Committee:

Approved for Adoption:

### Connection to the Curriculum:

- Appropriate for use with *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- Racism/racial relations
- Human rights issues
- American history in the 1920s and 1930s
- Capital punishment
- Issues of justice

Currently assigned as summer reading for Honors English II students

### Additional Connections:

*(AP, Honors, Essential/Applied, Dramas, Films, etc.)*

*A Lesson Before Dying* has been read as a *Big Read* or a *Community Read* in nearly a dozen American communities.