

Novel/Movie Intro

Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993) poses one of the most universal questions literature can ask: Knowing we're going to die, how should we live? It's the story of an **uneducated young black man named Jefferson, accused of the murder of a white storekeeper, and Grant Wiggins, a college-educated native son of Louisiana, who teaches at a plantation school.** In a little more than 250 pages, these two men named for presidents discover a friendship that transforms at least two lives.

In the first chapter, the court-appointed lawyer's idea of a legal strategy for Jefferson is to argue, "Why, I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this." This dehumanizing and unsurprisingly doomed defense rankles the **condemned man's grief-stricken godmother, Miss Emma,** and **Grant's aunt, Tante Lou.** They convince an unwilling Grant to spend time with Jefferson in his prison cell, so that he might confront death with his head held high.

Character List

Jefferson A twenty-one-year-old uneducated black field worker condemned to die after being innocently involved in an armed robbery and shooting.

Alcee Gropé The white storekeeper killed during the attempted robbery.

Brother and Bear Two young black men killed while attempting to rob Alcee Gropé's store.

Miss Emma (Emma Glenn) Jefferson's godmother; she is determined that Jefferson will die with dignity.

Grant Wiggins The narrator. A cynical, disillusioned teacher called upon to instill a sense of pride and self-worth in Jefferson before his execution.

Tante Lou Grant's aunt and Miss Emma's best friend.

Vivian Baptiste Grant Wiggins' Creole (mixed heritage of black and French or Spanish ancestry) girlfriend.

Peggy A fellow teacher; Vivian's friend.

Miss Eloise Bouie A friend of Miss Emma and Tante Lou.

Estelle Jefferson's cousin; one of Grant's students.

Henri Pichot The owner of the plantation that once employed Miss Emma and Tante Lou as cook and housekeeper.

Sam Guidry Sheriff of Bayonne County; Henri Pichot's brother-in-law.

Edna Guidry Sam's wife and Henri Pichot's sister.

Matthew Antoine Grant's former teacher, known in the black community as "the big mulatto from Poulaya."

Rev. Mose Ambrose Pastor of the plantation church where Grant Wiggins teaches during the week.

Dr. Joseph Morgan The white school superintendent who reinforces the white supremacy myth

by being more interested in the students' teeth and hygiene than in their access to learning materials.

Paul Bonin The young deputy at the county jail who befriends Grant and witnesses Jefferson's execution.

Key Facts about Novel

full title · *A Lesson Before Dying*

author · Ernest J. Gaines

type of work · Novel

genre · Fiction; historical fiction; social commentary

language · American English

date of first publication · 1993

publisher · Vintage Books

narrator · Grant Wiggins

point of view · First person

tone · Grant's narrative voice reflects his changing moods, shifting from brooding cynicism to awareness and confidence.

tense · Past

setting (time) · 1940s

setting (place) · Bayonne, Louisiana

protagonist · Grant Wiggins

major conflict · Grant and Jefferson struggle to help Jefferson die with dignity.

rising action · Grant's regular visits to Jefferson's jail cell; Jefferson's reaction of anger and silence

climax · Grant gives a passionate speech to Jefferson, and both men cry.

falling action · Jefferson becomes thoughtful and brave and dies an admirable death.

themes · Recognizing injustice and facing responsibility; redemption in death; the inescapable past

Important Quotes:

1. What justice would there be to take this life? Justice, gentlemen? Why, I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this.
2. It doesn't matter anymore. Just do the best you can. But it won't matter.
3. I want me a whole gallona ice cream.
4. I want you to show them the difference between what they think you are and what you can be.
5. Good by mr wigin tell them im strong tell them im a man