

## 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