

A Lesson Before Dying



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ERNEST GAINES

Ernest Gaines was born on a plantation, the fifth generation of his family to live there. He had eleven younger siblings, and was raised by his aunt. When he was fifteen years old, he moved to San Francisco to live with his mother and father, who'd left Louisiana to find work when he was a young child. He was most fortunate, he served in the military, and afterwards won a prodigious scholarship to study literature at Stanford University. During the 1960s, he published three novels: *Catherine Carmier*, *Of Love and Dust*, and *Bloodline*. While these works received good reviews, it was only in 1971 that Gaines achieved both critical and financial success with *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. On the success of this novel, he was awarded the highly prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship, and began teaching creative writing at the University of Louisiana in Lafayette, near the plantation where he was born. While teaching in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, Gaines continued to write prolifically, publishing many short stories, as well as the novels *A Gathering of Old Men*, and *A Lesson Before Dying*, the latter of which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award. While it failed to win either award, the novel's great popularity and critical acclaim led to Gaines being awarded a MacArthur "Genius Grant." Gaines continues to teach occasionally, though he has not published a novel in more than twenty years. He resides with his wife in Ocean, Louisiana, only a few blocks from the house where he was born.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A Lesson Before Dying alludes to a huge number of events from Black history in the 19th and 20th centuries. To begin with, Grant is descended from slaves, as are most of the families of the people in his community. Following the end of the Civil War in 1865, four million slaves were declared free by the 13th Amendment. (The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 had only freed slaves in the Southern territories, and made no claims about the unconstitutional slavery's threat.) Despite the 13th Amendment, most slaves continued to live much as they always had, because they had no money with which to leave the South; they continued to work on the same plantations where they had previously been imprisoned. Blacks were paid much less than their white counterparts, which forced them to continue living in the same places and perpetuated the cycle of Black poverty. Ernest Gaines himself is descended from slaves; in this day, he lives only a few minutes' away from the plantation where his ancestors were once held as slaves. *A Lesson Before Dying*

presents a bleak picture of the court system in the South: blacks were tried in courts run by white judges, jurors, attorneys, and bailiffs, meaning that they often faced enormous racism. During the period when the novel takes place, many Blacks accused of a crime were lynched—captured by the whites and hanged—before they could even appear in court. John B. Wells, who documented lynching in the South until her death in the 1930s, said that the court system was no different than lynching, as far as Blacks were concerned: either way, Blacks were treated like animals and given the harshest possible sentences, without any assumption of innocent until proven guilty. Jefferson's death sentence, then, is a mark of his jury's racism, not his guilt.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

It is likely that the direct literary inspiration for *A Lesson Before Dying* was the novel, "White Man's Doc" by the famous Renaissance poet Claude McKay, with its imagery of traps and imprisonment and its language of "hem and" and "fighting back." Like Gaines, McKay was reacting to the persecution and dehumanization of black people by white America and American culture. Also like Gaines, McKay endorses heroism and self-improvement as weapons for fighting persecution against blacks. The image with which *A Lesson Before Dying* begins, that of the meek black defendant being defended by an eloquent white attorney, has appeared in so many books and films that it's become a cliché. Surely the most famous example of this scene appears in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, in which the hero, Atticus Finch, defends the quiet, innocent Tom Robinson: Gaines's novel is undoubtedly of sorts, to Lee—while the defense attorney in *A Lesson Before Dying* is a controversial, scolding figure who makes Jefferson despise himself even as he's defending him from execution. Finally, Gaines spends much of his novel describing the career paths available to blacks in the first half of the twentieth century. For a better understanding of these issues as they would have appeared to blacks in the 1940s, the two most important texts are *Up From Slavery* (1901) by Booker T. Washington and *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) by W.E.B. DuBois. Washington's novel Du Bois sees the future of African Americans in terms of the liberal arts education, by studying culture and history, blacks can improve their minds and gain a foothold in American society. Washington objects to Du Bois's idea, on the grounds that a liberal arts education alienates blacks from their communities and each other; he argues that it is carpentry and hard work, not the study of Shakespeare or Dante, that will save African Americans from persecution. Both of these points of view show up in *A Lesson Before Dying*.

Lesson Before Dying Study Guide

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