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Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

A Lesson Before Dying

by Ernest J. Gaines

written by Diana Drew

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A Lesson Before Dying

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. recognize how setting, mood, and tone complement the themes of the novel.

2. understand how biblical allusions resonate with the plot and characters in *A Lesson Before Dying*.

3. identify allusions to well-known contemporaries of the characters in the novel and analyze their relationship to the themes of the novel.

4. evaluate the effectiveness of the first-person narration and the narrative device of incorporating other characters' voices.

5. analyze how the social and racial stratification in 1948 Louisiana affects the lives of the characters.

6. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.

7. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.

8. offer a close reading of *A Lesson Before Dying* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

Introductory Lecture

HISTORICAL SETTING

The Segregated South: *A Lesson Before Dying* takes place in Louisiana in the late 1940s. At that time, segregation was the law of the land in the southern states, including Louisiana. This meant that, by law, blacks and whites had separate public accommodations, from public schools and churches to restaurants, taverns, hotels, and drinking fountains. In places of employment and public buildings (such as the courthouse in *A Lesson Before Dying*), blacks and whites had to use separate entrances and separate bathrooms; undertakers had to provide separate hearses for blacks and whites; separate graveyards were mandated by law; and in some states blacks were denied access to public parks. Blacks and whites lived in separate neighborhoods (such as the "quarter" in *A Lesson Before Dying*). Marriage between blacks and whites was prohibited. Voting rights were also restricted for blacks. These segregationist laws were known as "Jim Crow" laws.

Sixteen southern states were responsible for 79 percent of the segregationist laws in the country. Louisiana had twenty-nine individual segregationist laws in force. The other southern states where segregation was the law of the land were Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. Although blacks in the South enjoyed equal rights immediately after the Civil War, with the end of Reconstruction in 1876, Southern states began reinstating segregationist laws. The Supreme Court case Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) codified segregation with its ruling that "separate but equal" did not violate the rights of African-Americans.

A later Supreme Court overturned the "separate but equal" doctrine in 1954 with the decision in *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas,* ending legal racial discrimination in public education.

From the time of slavery (outlawed in 1863 by President Abraham Lincoln, when he signed the Emancipation Proclamation, during the Civil War) through the 1940s, the Ku Klux Klan exerted a strong influence in the South, holding rallies, burning crosses, dragging black families out of their homes, and murdering blacks. Very few Klansmen were ever arrested or punished for their crimes.

Segregation exerted unspoken rules of social convention that stunted the humanity of both blacks and whites. In that context, seeing oneself as human—the point of Miss Emma's pushing Grant Wiggins to visit her godson in prison in *A Lesson Before Dying*—becomes a form of heroism.

As shown in the novel, individuals sometimes managed to circumvent unspoken rules and undermine the power of social convention. For instance, Miss Emma prevails on Henri Pichot to speak to his brother-in-law, the sheriff, to arrange for Grant Wiggins to visit Jefferson in prison. She uses as leverage everything she has done for the family over the years in running their household. Even though Pichot is uncomfortable about this request, he nonetheless feels compelled to accede to it.

Things were slowly beginning to change in the segregated South during the twentieth century in response to developments in the larger world, hinted at in the novel. For instance, following World War II, the armed forces were desegregated in 1948 by an executive order signed by President Harry Truman. Jackie Robinson had broken the color barrier in baseball in 1947, when he joined the major league Brooklyn Dodgers. Joe Louis was the heavyweight boxing champion of the world. (He beat Max Schmeling in 1938 to retain the title, a great source of pride to blacks throughout the country.) Civil rights activists, like the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., were beginning to press for equal rights for African-Americans. Yet segregation continued in the South, well into the 1960s and 1970s.

Not until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson (himself a native Texan), would segregation be abolished throughout the United States. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 voided all the segregationist laws relating to public accommodations, education, public facilities, federally assisted programs, and employment. The Voting Rights Act of 1965, also signed into law by President Johnson, prohibited discriminatory voter registration requirements, such as poll taxes and literacy tests, that had been used to disenfranchise blacks.

FIRST-PERSON NARRATION

A Lesson Before Dying is told in the first person, a point of view that has distinct advantages as well as limitations. The first-person narrator—the teacher Grant Wiggins—gives readers keen insights into the action from his point of view. We are privy to his interior life—his thoughts, his feelings, his anxieties, his perceptions of what other characters. On the other hand, the first-person narration limits the reader's understanding exclusively to the narrator's viewpoint.

Interestingly, Chapter 29, titled "Jefferson's Diary," is the only chapter not told in Grant Wiggins's voice. However, this chapter, too, is in the first person. Here the narrator is Jefferson himself, the pivotal character in the drama that plays out in the novel. This change in point of view is jarring for several reasons. First of all, the writing is ungrammatical, filled with spelling mistakes, errors in punctuation, and run-on sentences. Yet this chapter is very affecting, not least because it gives readers insight into the mind of the man about to be wrongly executed.

"Jefferson's Diary" picks up many of the themes in the rest of the novel. These include the cruelty and injustice of segregation and racism ("it look like the lord just work for wite folks"); the sense that Jefferson is a human being, not an animal (as seen in his response to the children from Grant's class who visit him in prison and in his understanding of lessons from the Bible); and the role of religion in the lives of Southern blacks.

First-person narrative infuses *A Lesson Before Dying* with an immediacy and a sense that "You are there." It places readers in the middle of the action, enabling them to watch the plot unfold and move toward its inexorable conclusion from the point of view of the teacher. Wiggins is something of an outsider because his education places him on a plane separate from that of his fellow blacks as well as the whites who view him as "uppity." This outsider's perspective enables readers to feel his frustration at the constraints of segregation, his burning desire to flee from the South, his exhilaration when he makes a breakthrough with Jefferson, and his understanding that not all whites embrace and support the system that oppresses black people (consider Paul Bonin, the deputy sheriff).

ERNEST J. GAINES

Born in 1933 on the River Lake plantation in Pointe Coupée Parish, Louisiana, Ernest J. Gaines grew up in the segregated South. At the age of nine he was picking cotton in the plantation fields. Like the school portrayed in *A Lesson Before Dying,* the black quarter's school that Gaines attended held classes only five or six months a year.

Gaines moved to California to join his parents when he was fifteen year old; they had left Louisiana during World War II. While out West, he attended San Francisco State University and later won a writing fellowship to Stanford University.

After publishing his first short story in 1956, Gaines went on to write eight books of fiction, including *Catherine Carmier, Of Love and Dust, Bloodline, The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (later made into a 1974 TV movie), *A Long Day in November, In My Father's House,* and *A Gathering of Old Men*. *A Lesson Before Dying* won the 1993 National Book Critics Circle Award. The author has also received a MacArthur Foundation grant, for writings of "rare historical resonance."

Gaines, who is writer-in-residence at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, divides his time between San Francisco and Lafayette, Louisiana. He is married to the lawyer Dianne Saulney.

Writing and Discussion Topics

1. How does the courtroom scene in Chapter 1 exemplify the social and racial stratification in 1948 Louisiana?

2. What is the significance of the narrator's position as a teacher—a black man with a college education—in light of what Miss Emma asks him to do?

3. Like a Greek tragedy, the plot of *A Lesson Before Dying* moves to an inescapable conclusion. Yet a subtle shift occurs toward the end that elevates Jefferson, as well as Grant Wiggins, making both of them heroic, though flawed, characters. Describe each of these shifts, citing specific events that prompt them and explain what these shifts mean to Jefferson and Grant.

4. Food is laden with meaning throughout *A Lesson Before Dying*. Explain the meaning of food to Tante Lou and Miss Emma. Touch on the difference in how food is viewed by men and women in the novel.

5. The narrator draws an analogy between the students he is trying to teach in the plantation church school and the lesson he has been asked to teach Jefferson before he is executed. Explain what underlies these two types of lessons and why the narrator finds it such an uphill battle to get through to his students.

6. Cite specific examples from *A Lesson Before Dying* in which the "system" dehumanized and emasculated male characters. Then point out how Grant, Jefferson, and Reverend Ambrose manage to express their humanity despite the oppression imposed by segregation.

7. What does the word *hog* mean to the characters in *A Lesson Before Dying?* Explain how the public defender's comparison of Jefferson to a hog in Chapter 1 affects Jefferson, Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Grant. Also delve into what the sheriff means when he refers to Jefferson as a hog in Chapter 6 (speaking of him as either a "contented hog" or an "aggravated hog") and why it is so unsettling when Jefferson himself acts like a hog in Chapter 11.

8. Much is left unspoken and unsaid in *A Lesson Before Dying.* Citing specific examples of this literary technique, explain how reality is inferred by the characters and why so much needs to be left unsaid.

Practice Free-Response Questions

PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE QUESTION 1

The first-person narrator in novels and short stories limits the factual knowledge available to the reader, but it also frees the author to fully explore the mind and soul of the character(s) who serve as the story or novel's narrator(s). Write a well-organized essay in which you analyze the effect of the use of first person in *A Lesson Before Dying,* both by Grant and by Jefferson.

PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE QUESTION 2

The climactic moment of a novel or play is often internal rather than external, a flash of insight or an epiphany on the part of one or more of the characters. In a well-organized essay, explain the epiphanies experienced by both the narrator and Jefferson and how the character arcs and story arcs parallel one another.

PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE QUESTION 3

One quality most critics look for in a novel of "literary merit" is the author's ability to create an atmosphere that is almost palpable. In a well-organized essay, evaluate the atmosphere of *A Lesson Before Dying* and analyze how it affects the novel's plot and characters.

PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE QUESTION 4

Culturally significant allusions—to the Bible, classical mythology, and the like—are common in works of literary merit. Write a well-organized essay in which you examine Gaines's use of biblical allusions in *A Lesson Before Dying* and evaluate how they contribute to the overall theme of the novel.

PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE QUESTION 5

The central conflict of a novel or play is often between opposing ideologies rather than between persons or groups. Write a well-organized essay in which you examine the tension between the sacred and the secular, religion and godlessness, in *A Lesson Before Dying,* citing specific places where this conflict emerges and how it plays out as the novel proceeds.

PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE QUESTION 6

Carefully read the passage at the end of Chapter 21, beginning with "Irene and my aunt want from me what Miss Emma wants from Jefferson" and ending with "It's up to Jefferson, my love." Then write a well-organized essay exploring the narrator's view of the emasculation of black men under the Southern system of segregation and what this means to the characters in *A Lesson Before Dying.*

PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE QUESTION 6

Carefully read the passage in Chapter 25, beginning with "Jefferson, I want us to be friends," and ending with "Do you understand what I'm saying to you, Jefferson? Do you?" In a well-organized essay, explain the various strategies Grant uses to reach Jefferson at this point in the story. Be sure to address in your essay the narrator's word choice, the flow of his argument, and his technique of interweaving past and present to make Jefferson understand what he is trying to say and what he needs Jefferson to do in response.

PRACTICE MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

PRACTICE MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS 1–5

Read the passage in Chapter 1 beginning "Even after he had gone to await the jurors' verdict…" through "The governor would set the date." Then choose the best answer to the following questions.

1. What are the distinguishing characteristics of the jury?
   A. They are all farmers.
   B. They are all storeowners.
   C. They are all from Jefferson's neighborhood.
   D. They are all lawyers.
   E. They are all white men.

2. Whose versions of the crime are told in this passage?
   A. Jefferson's, Tante Lou's, and Miss Emma's
   B. Jefferson's, the prosecutor's, and the public defender's
   C. The prosecutor's, the public defender's, and Mrs. Gropé's
   D. The prosecutor's, the public defender's, and Henri Pichot's
   E. The prosecutor's, the public defender's, and Miss Emma's

3. The phrase "his godmother became as immobile as a great stone or as one of our oak or cypress stumps" includes which figure of speech?
   A. simile
   B. metaphor
   C. synecdoche
   D. personification
   E. irony

4. To the public defender, what defines a "man"?
   A. the ability to recognize the names of poets, describe a rose, quote a passage from the Constitution or the Bill of Rights
   B. the ability to think quickly on his feet, strike quickly out of fear, quote a passage from the Bible
   C. the ability to chop wood, harvest corn, dig ditches
   D. the ability to strike quickly out of fear, load bales of cotton, handle a plow
   E. the ability to hold his liquor, quote biblical passages, put his family before himself

5. The prosecutor and the public defender's casting Jefferson as something other than a man strikes Miss Emma and Tante Lou as a form of
   A. racism
   B. segregation
   C. misunderstanding
   D. dehumanization
   E. prejudice

PRACTICE MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS 6–10

Read the passage in Chapter 6 beginning with "I was hungry" through "I went out to my car and drove away." Then choose the best answer to the following questions.

6. Pichot makes Grant wait nearly 2 1/2 hours because he
   A. dislikes Grant intensely.
   B. thinks that all blacks are chronically late.
   C. wants to show Grant that he is the one calling the shots.
   D. is a virulent racist.
   E. is the sheriff's brother-in-law.

7. Grant's use of proper grammar when addressing Sheriff Guidry shows that Grant
   A. has a postgraduate education.
   B. thinks he is better than the sheriff.
   C. thinks he is better than the other blacks in the parish.
   D. has no respect for the sheriff or the judicial system.
   E. is refusing to lower himself just to placate the sheriff.

8. Grant comes to the meeting with the sheriff feeling a mixture of
   A. curiosity and dedication.
   B. anger and trepidation.
   C. apathy and unease.
   D. determination and ambivalence.
   E. eagerness and humility.

9. The narrator's use of the word *nigger* suggests that Grant is struggling to
   A. set an example.
   B. prove his equality.
   C. set himself above the whites.
   D. show blacks that they should defer to whites.
   E. balance deferring to the whites and maintaining his dignity.

10. Grant waits for the four men to leave the kitchen before he walks out because he
    A. feels compelled to act in a subservient manner.
    B. has achieved his goal.
    C. is staging a power play.
    D. is exhausted from the encounter with the sheriff.
    E. needs to speak with Inez alone.

PRACTICE MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS 11–15

Read the passage in Chapter 10, beginning with "As I stood there listening to her" through "But they ain't nobody else." Then choose the best answer to the following questions.

11. The narrator's comment about dumping the food in the river is most likely intended to be
    A. sarcastic.
    B. sympathetic.
    C. angry.
    D. cheerful.
    E. humorous.

12. What does the narrator suddenly realize that his aunt and Miss Emma have "planned from the beginning"?
    A. that Jefferson will be eating all the food by himself
    B. that Jefferson will repent before he dies
    C. that the teacher will be visiting Jefferson by himself
    D. that the teacher will reach out to the other prisoners in addition to Jefferson
    E. that Jefferson needs to find God before he dies

13. To what is the narrator referring when he mentions "All the things you wanted me to escape by going to school"?
    A. his destiny as a great teacher
    B. his status as a second-class citizen
    C. his delinquent lifestyle
    D. his lack of purpose
    E. he sense of obligation

14. How will this visit to Jefferson in prison be different from the earlier ones?
    A. Grant will be going to the prison alone.
    B. Miss Emma will be going to the prison alone.
    C. Grant will be going to the prison with Tante Lou.
    D. Tante Lou will be going to the prison with Miss Emma.
    E. Professor Antoine will be going to the prison with Grant.

15. Which best describes Tante Lou's attitude toward Grant in this passage?
    A. cheerful
    B. well-meaning
    C. cajoling
    D. excited
    E. stubborn

PRACTICE MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS 16–20

Read the passage in Chapter 20, beginning with "Why that date?" through "the sensitive few will have forgotten about their Savior's death by then." Then choose the best answer to the following questions.

16. The tone of the interior commentary that the narrator offers on the exchange in this passage can best be characterized as
    A. angry.
    B. thoughtful.
    C. compassionate.
    D. surreal.
    E. complacent.

17. In this passage, the narrator compares Jefferson to which historical character?
    A. George Washington
    B. Moses
    C. the Apostle Paul
    D. Jesus
    E. George Washington Carver

18. Sheriff Guidry dislikes Grant because he thinks that Grant
    A. looks down on him.
    B. is a terrible teacher.
    C. encourages Jefferson to make trouble.
    D. schemes behind his back.
    E. is uppity.

19. Which of the following best summarizes the narrator's view of justice in this passage?
    A. The judicial system treats all Americans fairly and equally.
    B. A black man cannot get justice in the segregated South.
    C. Only the rich are treated justly in the criminal justice system.
    D. Black people who show deference to whites are treated justly.
    E. White people receive harsher sentences than black people.

20. Why is Jefferson's execution scheduled after Easter?
    A. because it needed to take place after Lent
    B. because of the community's religious sensitivities
    C. so it did not interfere with the Easter parade
    D. so it did not put a damper on families' Easter celebrations
    E. because the electric chair could not be used during the Lenten/Easter season

PRACTICE MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS 21–25

Read the passage in Chapter 20, beginning with "Irene and my aunt want from me" through "It's up to Jefferson, my love." Then choose the best answer to the following questions.

21. It is important to Miss Emma for Grant to give Jefferson "a lesson before dying" because she needs Jefferson
    A. to care about the state of his soul.
    B. to face his execution without fear.
    C. to defy 300 years of black dehumanization.
    D. to recognize the truth about his situation.
    E. to make her proud for once.

22. With whom does Miss Emma want Grant to collaborate in reaching her godson?
    A. Henri Pichot
    B. Sheriff Guidry
    C. Paul Bonin
    D. Reverend Ambrose
    E. Vivian

23. What is the "vicious circle" facing black men in the segregated South?
    A. They cannot protect their women unless they leave the South.
    B. They end up either in jail or as homicide victims because despair drives them to violence.
    C. They cling to their roots in the face of 300 years of slavery.
    D. They stand up for their rights only to be crushed by the white power structure.
    E. They tend to lose their sanity because of the strict social stratification in the segregated South.

24. Which forces are tearing the narrator apart?
    A. accepting Jesus Christ as his savior versus devoting all his energies to teaching
    B. fighting racism in the segregated South versus going along with it
    C. showing his masculinity versus opening up his feminine side to Vivian
    D. leaving the segregated South versus the imperative to keep faith with his aunt
    E. loving Tante Lou versus his feelings for Irene

25. What is it that the narrator believes that Miss Emma needs from Jefferson?
    A. a Bible in which he inscribes his name
    B. the assurance that he has accepted Jesus Christ before he dies
    C. the knowledge that he does not think of himself as a slave
    D. the truth about his guilt or innocence
    E. a memory of him standing tall, like a man

Answers and Explanations

1. Even though the story takes place in a rural area (hence, the possible assumption that the jurors were all farmers [A]), that is not spelled out in the passage. The victim was a storeowner, which might lead students to suspect that a jury of storeowners would be empaneled (B), but again, this is not specified as such. The passage is silent as to where the jurors lived (C) and their occupations (D), but readers can assume that they were not from Jefferson's neighborhood and they were not lawyers. **The only correct answer is (E), as noted toward the end of the passage: "The judge commended the twelve white men…"**

2. **The prosecutor's version and the public defender's version of events are both spelled out in this passage, along with Jefferson's (B).** While Tante Lou's view of the proceedings is implied toward the beginning, we do not hear her version of the crime nor Miss Emma's (A), Mrs. Gropé's (C), or Henri Pichot's (D).

3. The only figure of speech used in the cited phrase is a simile (*as immobile as a great stone* or *as one of our oak or cypress stumps*), making the correct answer **(A).**

4. The public defender denigrates Jefferson as less than a man, based on his physical appearance and his lack of intelligence. To the public defender, reacting quickly to events, lashing out in fear, and quoting from the Bible (B) do not make a person a man. Neither do farmwork (C and D), nor holding one's liquor and putting one's family first (E). **The only answer the public defender spells out as defining a man is (A).**

5. The narrator alludes to the impressions Miss Emma and Tante Lou have of the judicial proceedings without spelling them out *per se*. However, underlying their impressions is the sense that racism, segregation, and prejudice (A, B, and E) are accepted in the segregated South, as much a part of the landscape as the pecan trees. The two women also do not believe that the case against Jefferson involves a simple misunderstanding (C), because that could have been straightened out without a case being brought to court. **The key to the answer is the parenthetical line (Oh, yes, she did hear one word—one word for sure: "hog."), specifying that Tante Lou is focused on the dehumanization of Jefferson (D). This is reinforced by the narrator's noting that the prosecutor views Jefferson as an "animal," while the public defender refers to the jurors as "*gentlemen* of the jury," calls Jefferson "a cornered *animal,*" and points out, "I would just as soon put a *hog* in the electric chair as this."**

6. Miss Emma has put Henri Pichot in an awkward position, pressuring him to bend the rules so Grant can visit her godson in prison. While Pichot does not like Grant because Grant is an educated black man and Pichot considers him uppity, Pichot does not dislike him intensely (A); that is not the subtext here. Pichot also does not think all blacks are chronically late (B), and he is not a virulent racist (D). While (E) is partially true (both Pichot and Guidry are behind the decision to make Grant wait so long), it is not fully true, so it is incorrect. **The only correct answer is (C): This is a power play, as noted in the passage: "…it seemed that he [Pichot] and the sheriff were doing everything they could to humiliate me even more by making me wait on them."**

7. In the segregated South, blacks generally used a form of ungrammatical speech that showed their place to be lower in the social order than that of the more educated whites. **By using proper grammar in addressing the sheriff, Grant is making a clear point that he refuses to lower himself to placate the sheriff or other whites (E) in this situation.** His decision to speak properly has nothing to do with his education (A), his sense that he is better than the sheriff (B), his feeling that he is better than other blacks in the parish (C), or whether or not he respects the sheriff or the judicial system.

8. Grant harbors serious qualms about Miss Emma's mission for him—to make sure Jefferson goes to the electric chair knowing that he is a man, not an animal. While he is somewhat dedicated to the mission, he is not the least bit curious about the sheriff's thoughts on what Miss Emma asked him to do (A). He is neither angry nor afraid of meeting the sheriff (B), and he feels neither apathy nor unease about meeting the sheriff (C). He approaches the sheriff with neither a sense of eagerness nor a feeling of humility (E). **His qualms center on his determination to persuade the sheriff to accede to Miss Emma's wishes to let him visit Jefferson in prison, yet he is ambivalent about this mission. He would prefer not to have to do this and would like to blame forces beyond his control—that is, the white establishment in the segregated South—for his not following through on the mission (D).**

9. Grant is an anomaly in the segregated South—an educated black man and a teacher. As such, he is acutely aware of the disparity between how he thinks of himself and how he is viewed by the white power structure in the parish. **In this scene, he walks a fine line between deferring to the whites in the establishment while maintaining his dignity, making the correct answer (E).** He is not looking to set an example, prove his equality, or set himself above the whites (A, B, C). Neither does he want to show blacks that they should defer to whites (D), in fact, just the opposite. But he is torn about how to accomplish his goal while maintaining his dignity.

10. Grant performs a delicate balancing act throughout this scene. He must retain his self-respect as a black man, show that he is not thrilled to perform the mission given to him by Miss Emma, point out that he is there only at Miss Emma's request, all the while showing deference to the white men who represent the power structure in the community. In waiting to leave the kitchen, he does not feel compelled to act subservient (A), he is not staging any sort of power play (C), he does not need to speak to Inez alone (E), and he is not the least bit exhausted from the encounter with the sheriff (D). **The only correct answer is (B). At the closing of the scene, he deliberately plays by the unspoken rules of the segregated South, letting the white men leave the room before he does as a sign of deference. He has achieved his goal and he does not want to run the risk that the sheriff will change his mind.**

11. **The narrator is adopting a sarcastic tone here, (A), tinged with anger, but sarcasm is the dominant element in the quotation.** Throughout this exchange between Grant and Tante Lou, Grant is telling both Tante Lou and Miss Emma that he realizes that Miss Emma's illness is being faked and that he is a pawn in a game they have concocted. None of the other answers (B, C, D, or E) is even partially correct.

12. The light dawns on the narrator in this passage: **He suddenly realizes that Tante Lou and Miss Emma have made up a plan to ensure that Grant visits Jefferson by himself to teach him how to be a man. This will be his "lesson before dying" (C).** While food is discussed in this passage, food has nothing to do with the narrator's realization (A); neither do encouraging Jefferson to acknowledge his mistakes and repent for them (B), reaching out to other prisoners (D), nor finding God before he dies (E).

13. In this extended quotation, the narrator is furious at Tante Lou for forcing him to play the role of subservient black person—a role he has been able to leave behind for the most part because of his education. Those "things" she wanted him to "escape" by pursuing an education had nothing to do with being destined to become a great professor (A), a path of crime and delinquency (C), a sense that his life was spiraling out of control (D), or a need to volunteer with those less fortunate to avoid life's pitfalls (E). **Instead, he is referring to the feeling that he was not entitled to the same privileges and opportunities as white people, simply because of the color of his skin (B).**

14. While there is much discussion about what will happen during this visit to Jefferson in prison, **the upshot of this is that Grant will be going to the prison alone (A).** Miss Emma claims to be ill, so (B) is not correct. Tante Lou is staying home with Miss Emma, making (C) and (D) incorrect. Professor Antoine is mentioned by Grant, but he is not involved in the visit (E).

15. Tante Lou insists on Grant doing as Miss Emma wishes, despite Grant's anger and outrage over being humiliated by the prison officials and others in the white establishment. **She stubbornly maintains that he must do what Miss Emma wants (E).** Nowhere in the passage does she appear to exemplify any of the other adjectives (A, B, C, or D).

16. **The narrator is furious that the judge has set the date for Jefferson's execution based on the religious sensitivities of the white community, making (A) the correct answer.** The narrator is not feeling compassionate (C) or complacent (E) about the reasoning behind the sentencing date; neither does he characterize it as surreal (D). And while he might be considered thoughtful (B), the tone is overwhelminginly one of anger, much more than thoughtfulness.

17. All the allusions in the passage are biblical, **with the narrator drawing a strong analogy between Jefferson and Jesus (D).** The other answers (A, B, C, and E) are never mentioned in the passage, which focuses exclusively on how Jefferson's plight mirrors that of Jesus as an innocent persecuted by the "establishment."

18. **In this scene, as well as the other scenes with both Grant and Sheriff Guidry, the sheriff shows his dislike of Grant because he thinks the teacher is uppity (E).** The sheriff does not believe that Grant looks down on him (A), has no opinion on Grant's abilities as a teacher (B), does not worry that Grant is turning Jefferson into a troublemaker (C), and does not think that Grant is scheming behind his back (D).

19. **The narrator believes that no black man can get justice in the segregated South (B). This is clearly expressed in the paragraph that reads: "Twelve white men say a black man must die, and another white man sets the date and time without consulting one black person. Justice?"** The correct answer negates answer (A). The question of the rich getting justice is not addressed here (C), and neither is the question of whether black people who show deference to whites might get treated more fairly than those who do not (D). Obviously, answer (E) is incorrect; in fact, the opposite is true.

20. Irony suffuses this passage. **The correct answer, (B), focuses on this irony—that the community's religious sensitivities mandate that Jefferson's execution be set after Easter, the date of Christ's crucifixion.** The sheriff does note that the execution cannot take place during Lent, (A), but that is not the point Grant seizes upon. The Easter parade is not a factor in the timing of the execution (C); neither are families' Easter celebrations (D). There is no mention of when or why the electric chair can and will be transported (E).

21. In this passage, the narrator spells out how much the mission Miss Emma gives Grant means to her, framing that mission within the context of 300 years of slavery and black dehumanization. The mission has nothing to do with the state of Jefferson's soul (A), the sense that he should face his execution without fear (B), or the need for him to recognize the truth about his situation (D)—Jefferson is well aware that he is being executed unjustly. Miss Emma's concerns extend beyond personal pride (E). The key to understanding why the mission means so much to Miss Emma lies in seeing how 300 years of slavery have psychologically brutalized blacks—especially black men—dehumanizing them. By making Jefferson realize that he is a man, not an animal—the "lesson before dying" that Miss Emma wants Grant to impart—**Grant will enable Jefferson to stand up to the white establishment on behalf of his godmother and defy 300 years of black dehumanization in the segregated South (C).**

22. Miss Emma recognizes that the mission she wants Grant to carry out dovetails with the mission Reverend Ambrose feels takes precedence—caring for Jefferson's soul. **Therefore, she wants both Grant and Reverend Ambrose to work together (D).** She has no interest in reaching out to Henri Pichot (A), Sheriff Guidry (B), or Paul Bonin (C) on behalf of her godson; Vivian, as Grant's love interest, is a relative newcomer to her circle, so she would not prevail upon her to speak with Jefferson.

23. **According to the narrator, black men in the segregated South are caught in a terrible conundrum: They cannot protect their women unless they leave the South, but that imposes an impossible burden on those left behind (A).** While many black men experience despair, which drives them to violence (B), this is not the narrator's point here; neither is he focusing on the legacy of second-class citizenship wrought by 300 years of slavery (C), the sense that the white power structure crushes black men (D), nor the tendency of black men to go crazy because of the strict social stratification in the segregated South.

24. **The narrator feels as if he is being broken by the power structure in the segregated South and longs to leave his hometown, yet he feels compelled to stay to support his aunt, who supported him throughout his childhood and early adulthood (D).** He imagines that in another part of the country he would be able to fulfill his destiny, while in the Louisiana parish where he lives, his personal growth will be stunted. He is not thinking about accepting Jesus Christ or devoting all his energies to his students (A); he is not considering taking on the racist system as an activist as opposed to going along with the system to protect himself (B); he is not torn between his masculinity and opening up to Vivian (C); and his love for Tante Lou does not have anything to do with his feelings for Irene.

25. **Miss Emma is old and frail, and what she needs from Jefferson is a memory of him standing tall, like a man (E), before she dies.** While she is a devoutly religious woman, she does not need a Bible inscribed with her godson's name (A), the assurance that he accepted Jesus Christ (B), the knowledge that he does not think of himself as a slave (C), or the truth about his guilt or innocence as she knows that he is innocent (D).

A Lesson Before Dying

Chapter 1

1. Explore the significance of the opening sentence. Consider the manner in which the sentence introduces a central theme of the novel—the search for manhood. "I was not there, yet I was there."

   The narrator, Grant, is not physically present at Jefferson's trial, but he is aware of the injustice of the proceedings. He receives a play-by-play account from his aunt, Tante Lou, which, in effect, puts him in the courtroom, after the fact. He was not there, but he could not avoid being pulled into the vortex of the trial. This is the strict literal interpretation. More significant, however, the opening sentence is a confession. Grant is admitting his emotional distance and his attempts to absent himself from the oppression he feels as a black man in the segregated South. He didn't go to the trial because, as he says, he knew how it would turn out. The undertone of his remarks also suggests that knew that his physical presence would have been a comfort to his aunt and Miss Emma.

   Grant's central dilemma, as he seeks to define his manhood, is one of presence. He desires to run away from the segregated South, but he feels duty-bound to stay. He chooses not to attend Jefferson's trial, which is a cowardly action that mirrors his chronic, self-imposed emotional distance. At the beginning, Grant is hardly a stand-up guy. As the novel unfolds, Grant will be forced to become physically and emotionally present in the lives of those around him. Miss Emma's desire for Jefferson to "stand like a man" as he walks to his death has implications for Grant, as well. Because of her request, Grant will have to stand and face situations that he would prefer to avoid and in so doing, realize his own manhood.

2. Compare and contrast how the prosecutor's argument differs from the public defender's argument.

   The prosecutor says Jefferson, Brother, and Bear intended to kill Mr. Gropé; the public defender says Jefferson is incapable of planning a crime like that. The prosecutor paints Jefferson as a malicious "animal." By contrast, the public defender calls him "a cornered animal" and says, "I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this." Both the prosecutor and the public defender compare Jefferson to an animal.

3. From whose perspective is the story of the robbery and shooting told? Is this story presented as fact or as a subjective account?

   As narrator, Grant retells the story of the shooting in the third-person voice. At first, the narrative appears to be the accepted, factual account. Jefferson was at the wrong place, at the wrong time and is innocent. There, are, however, two key sentences that introduce doubt and suggest there may be two sides to this story. First, the narrator never clearly states who fired the shot that killed Mr. Gropé]. "Soon, there was shooting from another direction." It is Jefferson (in Jefferson's version of the shooting) who tells Mr. Gropé that Brother shot him. But neither the narrator nor the reader ever actually knows who fired the fatal shot. Then with the final sentence of that account –"That was his story." – the narrator reinforces the doubt. The next sentence, which outlines the prosecutor's case, shows that there are, indeed, two sides to this story, at least as far as the white jury is concerned. Ernest Gaines has said in interviews that he deliberately left the facts of the shooting ambivalent because he did not want the focus of the novel to be on Jefferson's guilt or innocence, but rather upon the struggle of men to achieve dignity in spite of oppressive circumstances.

Chapter 2

1. Why does Miss Emma want Grant to visit Jefferson in prison?

   She is angry that the public defender called her godson a "hog" in open court and suggested that he was not a man. She wants the teacher to visit Jefferson in prison to make him realize that the public defender was wrong, that he is, indeed, a man. As a man, he is capable of facing death with dignity, even though he was wrongly accused and convicted. This will be his "lesson before dying."

2. When Miss Emma first speaks to Grant after the verdict and sentencing, the narrator observes that "The pain I saw in that face came from many years past." What does the narrator mean by that?

   Miss Emma has endured a lifetime of pain living in the segregated South, working as a servant, and watching her godson grow up in the same oppressive circumstances. This is simply the culmination of a series of misfortunes that have befallen her in life. While she has grown resigned to these disappointments and hurts, the cumulative effect appears in her face as she contemplates the significance of her godson's sentence.

Chapter 3

1. How does Henry Pichot's insistence that Jefferson "did it" redirect the plot narrative?

   Pichot's remarks serve three purposes. Pichot closes the door on any suggestion that Jefferson's conviction should be appealed. No one here is going to be distracted with an appeal or a debate about whether Jefferson did or did not commit the crime; the novel is not about that. Now everyone, the narrator, Miss Emma and the reader, are focused upon the real matter at hand: how a condemned man can achieve dignity.

   There is also a biblical allusion here. Pichot can be seen as Pontius Pilot, washing his hands of the fate of Jesus. Pichot emphasizes that the jury convicted Jefferson; there is nothing that he can do.

   And finally, the narrator is suggesting that Pichot, whose testimony before the court suggests that he did believe Jefferson was innocent, will rationalize situations and justify his own reluctance or refusal to fight injustices against blacks. In this way, Pichot is symbolic of Southern whites who permit the injustices of legal segregation. As Pichot is talking to Miss Emma, he is also trying to convince himself that he should not get involved. "He did it," Henri said, leaving no doubt in his mind. "I spoke up for him because of you, but all the time I knew he did it."

2. Miss Emma keeps saying that Grant "doesn't have to go" to visit Jefferson in prison. The narrator comments, "She was looking at me but not seeing me, and not meaning what she was saying, either." What is Grant implying by this, and what does he think she means?

   Miss Emma is devastated by what has happened to her godson, who is basically a good person and who was wrongly accused and convicted of robbery and murder. While she says Grant "doesn't have to go," she wants to persuade him to visit Jefferson. Grant discerns this, realizing that even though she says he "doesn't have to go," it would compound her suffering if he refused her request. Her distant look, a sign of profound introspection, signals that she is deeply troubled by her godson's plight. Her body language speaks louder than, and contradicts, her words.

3. What does the back door of Henri Pichot's plantation house symbolize to Grant and his aunt? Why does having to enter the plantation house through the back door rankle Grant?

   Going through the back door, rather than the front door, symbolizes submission to, and acceptance of, the racist social mores of the Deep South. Both Grant and Tante Lou wanted more for Grant; that is why he attended and graduated from college. Neither one of them accepts the racism that surrounds them. Entering through the back door is especially grating on Grant because he realizes that he is just as good as Pichot and that, by deferring to the unjust social mores of the South, he is tacitly accepting them, so Miss Emma can persuade Pichot to do what she wants.

4. How does Miss Emma prevail on Henri Pichot to speak to the sheriff on her behalf?

   She uses their past relationship as leverage to get him to do what she wants. She reminds him of everything she has done for his family through the years, running their household smoothly. She points out, "This family owe me that much, Mr. Henri. And I want it. I want somebody do something for me one time fore I close my eyes. . . ."

Chapter 4

1. In describing Bayonne, the narrator mentions that the town's major industries include "a slaughterhouse, mostly for hogs." How does this echo and expand on the public defender's summation in Jefferson's trial in Chapter 1?

   In his summation, the public defender calls Jefferson a hog, pointing out that he did not have the mental capacity to form a plan to commit the crime for which he was charged. The prosecutor also compares Jefferson to an animal that does not know right from wrong. By way of analogy, the judicial system, which is clearly stacked against African-Americans in the segregated South, is sending Jefferson to be "slaughtered" unjustly. Bayonne is the parish seat, where the courthouse is located, making this analogy especially strong.

2. Several times in the course of the novel, including Chapter 4, the narrator expresses the need to get away from the town where he lives. Explain why he feels compelled to flee and what keeps him there despite the urge to leave.

   Grant feels suffocated by the stringent social mores of the segregated South, which keep blacks subservient and undermine the humanity of both blacks and whites. He actually did leave once—to visit his parents in California—but then returned, drawn by a need to try to help his fellow blacks rise above their circumstances, just as he has. Yet he still has to navigate the treacherous waters of social discourse gingerly, refusing to lower himself to the level of most uneducated blacks but delicately speaking to whites without appearing "uppity." This kind of awkward dance generates a cognitive dissonance within him that makes him want to leave this world behind and forge a new life elsewhere. Yet he feels a commitment to the people there and a need to help them.

Chapter 5

1. Grant is in a foul mood in this chapter, and he appears to lash out at the children. Why is he in such a terrible mood? To whom does he compare the students in his diatribe, and what is the point he is trying to convey to them?

   Grant feels that Miss Emma has given him an impossible mission—to make Jefferson into a man before he dies, so he can die with dignity. That is why Grant is so distraught in this chapter. In his mind, turning Jefferson into a man is akin to the work he is trying to do with the children in the plantation school. He is trying to help them rise above their circumstances so they are not crushed by the dehumanizing effects of segregation and racism in the Deep South. He wants to make them view themselves as fully human. But it appears to be a Sisyphean task: Just when he seems to be making progress, he ends up back at square one.

2. The unspoken "rules" that govern social relations between whites and black in the segregated South require blacks to intuit signs and meanings. In writing of Farrell Jarreau, the black handyman for Henri Pichot, the narrator says, "To learn anything, he had to attain it by stealth or through an innate sense of things around him." How does this kind of stealth undermine one group's sense of humanity and keep members of that group in a subservient position?

   Blacks in the segregated South have to tiptoe around whites, discerning what is going on by picking up on subtle signs, rather than asking about things directly. This kind of stealth approach to life prevents blacks from achieving their full humanity because they are treated like children by the dominant group in society (whites); that is, they are denied access to information and explanation.

Chapter 6

1. The scene in which Grants meets with Sheriff Guidry, Henri Pichot, Louis Rougon, and the fat man is choreographed like a ballet. How does Grant sidestep the land mines in this scene, and what rhetorical devices does he use to get what he wants?

   Grant performs a delicate balancing act between behaving like "the teacher that I was, or like the nigger that I was supposed to be." He refuses to play dumb, just to fit into the role the sheriff assigns to all blacks, but he shies away from showing too much intelligence because he wants to persuade the sheriff to accede to Miss Emma's wishes. He does this by speaking proper English, rather than speaking a lower-class version of the language, common among most blacks in the quarter. Grant also sidesteps the sheriff's question about whether the sheriff or his wife is right by saying, "I make it a habit never to get into family business." Yet when Sheriff Guidry says, "You're smart. Maybe you're just a little too smart for your own good," Grant knows enough to keep quiet. He also waits for the four men to leave the kitchen before he walks out, in tacit deference to them. The scene plays out on a razor's edge, partly because Grant himself is conflicted about the mission Miss Emma has given him and partly because he has to walk a fine line between seeming "uppity" and forfeiting his sense of dignity. As the narrator says, "To show too much intelligence would have been an insult to them. To show a lack of intelligence would have been a greater insult to me."

2. In announcing his decision, the sheriff says, "I'd rather see a contented hog go to that chair than an aggravated hog. It would be better for everybody concerned." What does his word choice here say about the sheriff's attitude toward black people as well as his feeling about community life in his parish?

   Sheriff Guidry views Jefferson as a hog—an animal, not a human being—just as the prosecutor and public defender did in Chapter 1. In running his jail, he prefers to have his prisoners docile ("contented"), not filled with delusions that they are better than they really are or deserve better treatment at the hands of the judicial system ("aggravated"). By noting that this would be "better for everybody concerned," he is saying that Jefferson would be worse off if he realized that his life was being cut short unjustly, and he is warning Grant not to put such notions in his head.

Chapter 7

1. What is the significance of the fact that Dr. Joseph repeatedly calls Grant by the wrong name?

   Whites viewed blacks as interchangeable nonentities, rather than distinct human beings. The superintendent visits the school once a year, yet he never bothers to learn Grant's name and calls him by the wrong name in front of the children. He seems to do this out of a lack of interest, rather than out of malice, but by failing to see Grant as a distinct individual, he reflects the view of the white power structure in late-1940s Louisiana.

2. When describing the superintendent's examination of the black students' teeth, Grant notes, "At least Dr. Joseph had graduated to the level where he let the children spread out their own lips, rather than using some kind of crude metal instrument. I appreciated his humanitarianism." What is the narrator's tone in this observation?

   Grant is being sarcastic. Given the context *of the tooth examination, the superintendent is being anything* but *humane.*

3. What does Grant compare the superintendent's examination of the children's teeth to? What motif does this continue to establish?

   Grant asserts that the examination of the teeth recalled a slaveowner's checking the teeth of a slave he was considering purchasing. Even worse, it recalls a cattleman examining the teeth of a cow or a horse he was considering buying. These comparisons build the motif that the whites in the segregated South treated the blacks as less than human—as animals.

Chapter 8

1. The story the narrator recounts of the mulatto teacher, Matthew Antoine, exudes a strong tone of futility. How does this dovetail with the overall tone of the book?

   Futility is a dominating motif in A Lesson Before Dying, *as the black characters struggle to make their way in a system of segregation seriously skewed against them. Not only do they struggle to get ahead in financial terms, but they struggle to express their humanity as well. Among the "systems" arrayed against them are the judicial system (in which Jefferson is wrongly convicted) and the educational system (which is severely underfunded and viewed by the white establishment as pointless, since the blacks will only be taking menial jobs in the workforce anyway).*

2. How does Matthew Antoine's experience mirror the narrator's? How is it different?

   Like the narrator, Matthew is also a teacher in the plantation school system who longs to leave the segregated South and find fulfillment in a place where his talents are valued. Yet despite the compelling urge to flee the South, Matthew remains. Matthew believes there is no hope of ever elevating the children he was teaching to a level above that assigned to them by the larger (white) power structure. He feels that no matter what he does, the children will simply grow up to be second-class citizens or to be ground up by the system (that is, killed or languishing in prison for killing someone else). The narrator is not entirely convinced of the futility of his efforts, but does wonder whether he is accomplishing anything with his lessons.

3. And how does Matthew's experience echo that of the mulattos in Chapter 25?

   Because he is a mulatto, Matthew has a measure of self-hatred mixed with self-importance that comes from being part white. This echoes the conflicted feelings of the mulattos in the bar in Chapter 25. The sense that being part white makes a person somehow "better than" or "superior to" those who are all black shows the impact of societal segregation on individual lives, distorting them and making them less than fully human.

4. How does Matthew contribute to the overall theme of the novel?

   Since the "lesson" of humanity is the major theme of the novel, the narrator's recollection of Matthew Antoine's life makes readers see the broader impact of segregation as a dehumanizing force in individual lives.

Chapter 9

1. How does the physical structure and setting of the courthouse reflect the social stratification in late-1940s Louisiana?

   Everything about the courthouse bespeaks the power of Southern whites in a system of segregation and social stratification. The statue of a Confederate soldier by the walk leading up to the courthouse door signals that the power structure in the parish favors the Confederate (proslavery) cause. Besides the national and state flags, a Confederate flag flies outside the courthouse. The bathroom for black people was located outside by the basement and was always filthy; the indoor toilet was only for whites (that is, those with privilege in the system of social arrangements in force there). So the power structure is actually enshrined in the architecture of the courthouse.

2. The narrator says that Jefferson had been "thinking too much the past few weeks." What was he thinking about and how does his tone reflect his state of mind at this point in the story?

   Jefferson has been thinking about his upcoming execution. When he looks at the narrator, his eyes mocking the teacher, he says, "You the one . . . [g]o'n jeck that switch?" He is referring to the switch on the electric chair, which has obviously been dominating his thoughts in the weeks he has been in prison without visitors. His angry, bitter, wry tone reflects his fears of what awaits him and his feelings of futility and hopelessness.

Chapter 10

1. Why is the narrator so angry at his aunt?

   The narrator feels that his aunt is complicit in the humiliation he has had to suffer in making arrangements to visit Jefferson in prison and then actually visiting him there, and that makes him furious. As she was bringing him up, she always encouraged him to rise above his circumstances and fulfill his potential, but by forcing him now to kowtow to the white establishment to do what Miss Emma needs him to do, he is being humiliated over and over again—being made to go into the plantation house through the back door, being made to wait hours to be seen by Henri Pichot and the sheriff, and being searched each time he visits the jail.

2. Miss Emma keeps saying she does not want to be a "burden" on anybody and she does not want Grant to go to the prison if it is a "burden." What is the subtext here?

   Miss Emma says *she does not want to force Grant to visit her godson in prison—that she does not want to "burden" him with this responsibility—but she has no one else she trusts to fulfill the mission of making Jefferson recognize that he is fully human before he dies. Earlier in the novel, she uses the same word in the same way, giving Grant an out if he needs to take it, but subtly prevailing on him to do what she wants despite his misgivings and reservations. Like much in the segregated South, meaning is distorted—what a person says is often the opposite of what she means—and the true meaning of a person's words must be inferred because what one says and what one means are two different things.*

Chapter 11

1. How does Jefferson's reaction to the food Grant brings to the prison reflect his state of mind?

   By referring to himself an "old hog" and going down on his knees to eat from the bag of food without using his hands, Jefferson is showing how desperate he feels and how hurt he was at being called a "hog" in the courtroom. His expression—pained, cynical, defiant—is etched in his face, reflecting the depth of anger and hurt he feels being cooped up, like a hog in a pen, unjustly.

Chapter 12

1. What do Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis represent to the narrator?

   Both Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis are outstanding African-American athletes who excel in sports traditionally the province of whites, making them a source of tremendous pride for blacks. At the time the novel takes place, they were viewed as heroes because their exploits on the field and in the ring made them not just the equal of whites, but actually superior to whites. At the time of the story, Jackie Robinson had just completed his second season with baseball's major league Brooklyn Dodgers; he was the first black to break major league baseball's color barrier, when he joined the Dodgers in 1947. Looking back to the 1930s, the narrator recalls the pride he and his fellow blacks felt when Joe Louis beat Max Schmeling to retain the title of heavyweight champion of the world. In the late 1940s, blacks had few of their own to look up to, so Robinson and Louis were lionized by African-Americans all over the country.

2. Why does the narrator want to run away? What keeps him there?

   The narrator feels tremendously burdened by the mission Miss Emma has given him (to make Jefferson realize that he is a human being before he dies), and by the work he does as a teacher, which often seems futile in the face of Southern segregation. He envisions himself moving far from the South, where race would not be the defining factor in his life. But he feels a strong commitment to the children he teaches—and to the aunt who raised him—and he will not renege on those commitments.

Chapter 13

1. How does Reverend Ambrose's appearance at this point in the story introduce the theme of religious versus secular understanding?

   Grant has just returned from his first visit to Jefferson alone, and Reverend Ambrose asks him what Jefferson is thinking, deep in his soul. The reverend believes that Jefferson must reconcile with God before dying, while Grant, in fulfilling the mission Miss Emma assigned him, is trying to make Jefferson realize that he is a human being, that his humanity need not be compromised by the system that wrongfully convicted him and is now set to execute him. The religious and the secular are two ways of understanding the world, and the conflict between them is embodied in the characters of the reverend and Grant (who had lost faith years before). The reverend thinks Jefferson needs a Bible in prison; Grant thinks he needs clean clothes and possibly some food. As the story proceeds, both play a part Jefferson's transformation because both are part of African-American life in the segregated South.

Chapter 14

1. This chapter incorporates images of and references to love, faith, and death. Cite particular places where these concepts appear and how they relate to each other and to the story as it has unfolded up to this point.

   Regarding faith: It is Sunday, the Christian day of worship, and most of the residents of the quarter are in church. After the narrator observes that "Sunday is the saddest day of the week," Vivian suggests that he ought to go to church. In response, he says, "The only thing I believe in is loving you." Regarding death: The narrator notes that entire plantation is "deadly quiet, except for the singing coming from the church . . ." Then, as he and Vivian are strolling through the quarter, they pass the cemetery. Regarding love: Grant and Vivian express their love for each other and then make love in the sugarcane field. The images of love, faith, and death are intertwined throughout the novel. Jefferson, who is facing death, loves his godmother; Miss Emma loves her godson, who is about to be executed for a crime he did not commit, and holds fast to her faith; Vivian and Grant love each other, but Jefferson's impending death puts a strain on their relationship because Grant has to lie to Miss Emma about Jefferson's attitude; and while Grant believes in God (or at least Vivian believes he does), he is alienated from the church.

Chapter 15

1. Tension roils beneath the surface of this chapter. Explain the source of the tension and how it plays out.

   This is the first time Grant has brought Vivian to meet his aunt, and Tante Lou feels threatened by anyone in whom Grant expresses a romantic interest, fearing that he might decide to get married and move away. In addition, his aunt is angry at Grant because he refuses to go to church. To compound the tension, Grant insists on making the coffee even though Tante Lou tells him not to. Grant and Tante Lou have an uneasy truce between them. They love each other and Tante Lou does not want Grant to move out of her house, but she disapproves of his lack of faith and his refusal to attend church. She also thinks he sometimes fails to treat her with the proper respect. Tante Lou raised Grant to believe he was the equal of any man, and there is tension between them now because Miss Emma's request has forced Grant to play the role of second-class citizen to persuade members of the white establishment to let him visit Jefferson in prison.

Chapter 16

1. In this chapter the narrator is not present for a scene he needs to describe. How does the author finesse this so readers know what happened in the absence of the narrator?

   Gaines has the narrator eavesdrop on a conversation between Tante Lou and Miss Eloise about the scene in the jail when Grant was not present. By having Tante Lou recount the incident to her friend within earshot of Grant, readers learn what happened in Jefferson's jail cell when the first-person narrator was not present to witness it firsthand.

2. Why does Grant want to stop visiting Jefferson in jail? What makes him go back?

   Grant is uncomfortable visiting Jefferson in jail because he feels that Jefferson is trying to make him feel guilty for putting him in an untenable situation. In teaching the children in the plantation school, much as he has been asked to teach Jefferson, Grant tries to do everything in his power to keep the schoolchildren from ending up in jail—or worse—but he refuses to feel guilty about those he cannot save from a dismal future. Despite Grant's misgivings, the iron will of Tante Lou forces him to return to the jail to carry out Miss Emma's wishes for her godson.

Chapter 17

1. Delicate negotiations occur to arrange for Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Jefferson's other visitors to meet with him the dayroom, rather than in his prison cell. How and why is the sheriff persuaded to change his mind about where Jefferson can see his visitors?

   Behind Grant's back, Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Reverend Ambrose pay a visit to the sheriff's wife, Miss Edna, to ask her to prevail on the sheriff to allow them to meet with Jefferson in a place where all of them could sit down at once. Initially, the sheriff's wife is reticent about even asking her husband to consider this. But when Miss Emma reminds the sheriff's wife of everything she has done for the family through the years, using that as leverage in this negotiation, Miss Edna agrees to speak to the sheriff about Miss Emma's request. Put in an awkward spot by his wife, the sheriff then grudgingly tells Grant that Jefferson can meet his visitors in the dayroom, rather than the jail cell, but with the proviso that he is shackled hand and foot at all times. This allows the sheriff to save face to a certain extent.

Chapter 18

1. How does Grant attempt to get through to Jefferson during his prison visit recounted in this chapter?

   Grant tries to appeal to Jefferson's sense of compassion for his godmother, calling on him to recognize that he has a moral obligation to her for raising him and caring for him up to this point. Grant urges Jefferson to be kind to Miss Emma, by eating the food she lovingly prepares for him, by responding to her questions when she visits, and by talking to Grant, as she has asked.

2. Explain the biblical allusion inherent in the exchange between Grant and Jefferson regarding Christmas and Easter.

   Jefferson initially feigns confusion about the meaning of Christmas when Grant tells him that the children are planning a Christmas pageant. "That's when He was born, or that's when He died?" Jefferson asks. When Grant tells him that Christmas was when Jesus was born, Jefferson then recalls that Easter is when "they nailed Him to the cross. And He never said a mumbling word." This is one of the most significant passages in which the author draws a parallel between Jefferson, who will be executed, and Jesus, who was crucified.

3. What does the narrator mean when he comments that Paul Bonin, the deputy sheriff, "had come from good stock"?

   Unlike the sheriff and the other prison guards, Paul sees blacks as human beings. In the segregated South, biology was destiny. Whites had all the privileges, blacks were second-class citizens, or worse. Yet, if a person, like Paul, came from "good stock," that meant he could see beyond the strictures of the socially stratified system that stunted the lives of both whites and blacks. Paul treats Grant like an equal, despite how his peers and superiors view the teacher.

Chapter 19

1. Explain the significance of the Christmas play at the church. What does the sole gift under the tree signify? Who is the intended recipient? Why did so many people attend this event this year in comparison to years past?

   The Christmas play is especially poignant because it is dedicated to Jefferson, who sits on death row, awaiting his execution, just as Jesus awaited his own execution. (Jesus's crucifixion occurred on Good Friday, just before Easter; Jefferson's execution will take place just after Easter.) The sole gift under the tree is destined for Jefferson and it reminds everyone that he, like Jesus, is a sacrificial lamb, wrongly accused. Unlike past years, this year the Christmas play draws out almost everyone in the black community, who gather together to honor Jefferson and encourage the young people to continue trying to express their humanity despite the oppressive conditions of the segregated South.

Chapter 20

1. Describe the mood when Sheriff Guidry tells Grant and Reverend Ambrose about the date of Jefferson's execution.

   Tension fills the room as the sheriff tells Grant and Reverend Ambrose about the date set for Jefferson's execution. Henri Pichot looks worried, probably because he realizes that Jefferson is not guilty of the crime of which he was convicted. Guidry is uneasy because he does not like to have to explain his decisions to black people. Grant, who knows that Jefferson is innocent, is furious at the judicial system in which "twelve white men say a black man must die, and another white man sets the date and time without consulting one black person." Reverend Ambrose feels awkward being in a white man's front room, and acts in an obsequious manner, which seems to exacerbate Grant's anger at the unfairness of Jefferson's plight.

Chapter 21

1. According to the narrator, how does Jefferson's plight exemplify the plight of black men in the segregated South?

   Jefferson has been tried and convicted by an all-white jury and sentenced to death by a white judge. His white attorney's sole defense is to claim that Jefferson is no smarter than a hog. Jefferson, as a black man, is denied due process and dehumanized by the person who is supposed to defend and elevate him.

2. How does Jefferson have it within his power to break the vicious circle the narrator describes to Vivian in this chapter?

   The legacy of slavery in the segregated South forces black men into subordinate and emasculating roles. So black men have only two choices: (1) to flee the South to retain their sanity, dignity, and humanity, or (2) to remain in the South and be broken—spiritually, psychologically, and emotionally—by the racist system that dehumanizes them. By rising above the strictures of this racially stratified system—by seeing himself as fully human and fully entitled to the respect accorded any other human being—Jefferson has it within his power to break the circle. That is the "lesson" Grant is trying to teach him.

Chapter 22

1. What prompts this change in Jefferson's attitude and how does Grant respond to the change?

   This is Grant's first visit since the date of Jefferson's execution has been set. Now that he knows the date of his upcoming death, an inner calm seems to suffuse Jefferson, supplanting the pain and hatred that he had exuded in the previous visits. Jefferson's humanity begins to come through, as he looks back at the fateful day when Mr. Gropé was killed and realizes that he was supposed to be somewhere else, with someone else, instead of being with Brother and Bear. Jefferson is civil in his exchange with Grant, contrary to how he behaved during earlier visits.

2. Explain how the author uses Jefferson's response to conversation about two mundane things—a gallon of ice cream and a radio program—to develop a key theme of the novel, man's expression of humanity.

   Food has been an important motif throughout the novel. Previously, Jefferson responded to the food as a hog would, plunging headfirst into the food bag. Jefferson's actions illustrated how deeply he had been dehumanized by the characterizations of him as a hog. Now, when Jefferson is able to recall a fondness for ice cream, he is voicing his humanity and signaling his willingness to respond to the joys of human life. This recollection is bittersweet and underscores the unfairness of his situation and the poverty of the life he once led. He never had more than a nickel cone of ice cream; the only time he'll eat his fill will be his last meal.

   Music is one of the great products of civilized society. By establishing a connection between the men through their shared appreciation of music, the author is emphasizing Jefferson's humanity. Jefferson and Grant establish a rapport with conversation about Randy's Record Shop, an actual radio program popular in the South in the 1940s. Jefferson's enthusiasm also gives Grant the idea to purchase a radio for him to give him something to take his mind off the impending execution.

3. How is the discussion about the radio significant to the rising action of the novel?

   This exchange marks a real turning point in the relationship between Jefferson and Grant. They are both now reaching out to the other. Grant, who has resisted and resented the visits, now becomes an enthusiastic participant in the lessons before dying, eager to purchase a radio. Jefferson allows himself to be vulnerable to Grant by discussing the music and abandoning his pose as a "hog." The radio itself will become a rung on the ladder they climb together toward their independent realizations of their manhood.

Chapter 23

1. How does Ernest J. Gaines convey to readers what happens in the scene when Reverend Ambrose, Miss Emma, and Tante Lou visit Jefferson in the absence of the first-person narrator?

   Gaines has the narrator report that he learned about what happened during their visit from Paul, the deputy sheriff, who told him about it later on.

2. What conflict erupts in this chapter? What triggers that conflict? Who are the principals involved in the conflict, and what do they represent?

   The conflict centers on the radio that Grant has bought for Jefferson to keep him company in his jail cell. Because he cannot bring the radio to the dayroom, Jefferson refuses to meet with his godmother, Tante Lou, and Reverend Ambrose in the dayroom; instead, they must meet him in his cell, which is cramped and uncomfortable for the visitors. The principals in the conflict are Grant, the narrator, and Reverend Ambrose. Grant represents secularism, while the reverend represents religion, faith, and spirituality. Grant argues that Jefferson needs the radio to help him feel like a human being (what Miss Emma wants), and does nothing to turn him against God; Reverend Ambrose contends that the radio distracts Jefferson from thinking about God and the state of his soul.

Chapter 24

1. The narrator observes that Miss Emma did not feel the same way about Grant's mission as Tante Lou and Reverend Ambrose did. Explain how Miss Emma's feelings about Grant's mission differ from Tante Lou's and Reverend Ambrose's missions.

   Unlike Tante Lou and Reverend Ambrose, Miss Emma sees a larger process at work in her godson's life. Beyond saving his soul (Tante Lou and Reverend Ambrose's chief concern), Miss Emma wants to save his humanity, to make him realize that he is a full-fledged human being, not the "hog" he was labeled by the public defender in open court.

2. The narrator notes that he did not want to look at Miss Emma too long because "I knew what I would find in her face, and I didn't want to see it." To what is he referring?

   The narrator knows that Miss Emma's face reflects unbearable pain, anguish, and a sense of terrible, impending loss.

3. As Jefferson and Grant walk around the dayroom, Grant appeals to Jefferson to be a hero and to chip away at the myth that underlies racial stratification in the segregated South. Summarize the argument Grant makes in urging Jefferson to exemplify dignity, identity, love, and humanity.

   Grant urges Jefferson to treat his nannan *with kindness, with selflessness, and with compassion; this exemplifies heroism. In addition, he calls on Jefferson to stand tall with dignity, heart, and love for his people, to exude "the common humanity that is in us all." This would undermine the belief by the white establishment that all blacks are no better than animals. Those in the white power structure scapegoat black people as way to make themselves appear to be superior to blacks. Grant points out that Jefferson has a rare opportunity to choose his own destiny, to choose how he goes to the electric chair—either as a man, imbued with humanity, or without the self-awareness, compassion, and dignity that makes us human.*

4. In what ways does the exchange between Jefferson and Grant at the prison bring the novel to a climax? Identify specific points in the conversation that mark key turning points for both Grant and Jefferson.

   Jefferson initially refuses to eat the gumbo his aunt has brought, which is an act of profound rejection. His answers are mumbled monosyllables. But as Grant coaxes him away from the table and they begin to walk around the room, Grant tells Jefferson that he wants to be his friend and he coaxes him to try the gumbo, to make his aunt happy. Jefferson acquiesces.

   The key exchange occurs when Grant defines "hero" for Jefferson and tells him that he can be a hero to the community. Grant reveals himself, confiding his own weaknesses to Jefferson. With his hero speech, Grant is talking as much to himself as he is to Jefferson.

   This sentence sums up the essence of the novel and of Grant's mission: "To them, you're nothing but another nigger—no dignity, no heart, no love for your people. You can prove them wrong." Grant's confession that he has taught students to read and write but not to respect themselves or to live with love and dignity also shows that he realizes that he has failed his people. Grant's confession also touches Jefferson and perhaps for the first time in his life, gives him a purpose.

   Grant says, "As long as none of us stand, they're safe." By standing tall at his execution, Jefferson can do what the Rev. Ambrose and Grant have not done so far by remaining submissive to whites in power.

   Jefferson responds to Grant with tears in his eyes—a significant indication that he is now also committed to the lesson before dying.

   Grant also cries, and as the narrator, he acknowledges that he realizes that he is "part of the whole." This realization marks an important turning point in Grant's efforts to come to terms with his own search for strength and dignity.

Chapter 25

1. When the narrator describes the mulattos, he keeps repeating that they went out of their way not to work "side by side with the niggers." What is the impact of this repetition?

   Readers grasp that, like most whites in the segregated South, the mulattos would do anything to avoid coming in contact with African-Americans—in business, in school, in any public venues. Readers infer that, growing up, the mulattos were practically brainwashed that the black part of their heritage was to be disdained. The author, through his first-person narrator, uses repetition to emphasize how prejudiced against blacks the mulattos are (perhaps even more prejudiced than their white counterparts).

Chapter 26

1. The stress of visiting Jefferson in prison and trying to fulfill Miss Emma's assignment is taking its toll on Grant. Explain how.

   In the previous chapter, he lashed out with his fists against the mulattos who were castigating Jefferson.Iin this chapter, he is recovering from his injuries at Vivian's home. Their relationship is being strained in the bedroom, and because of stress from her husband (who now insists on seeing his children every weekend). Grant feels as if everyone is pulling him apart—Miss Emma, Tante Lou, Reverend Ambrose, the schoolchildren, his neighbors in the quarter, even Jefferson.

Chapter 27

1. In his diatribe at the end of the chapter, the reverend draws an analogy between himself and Grant. Explain the analogy the reverend draws between himself and Grant. How does it relate to what the reverend is trying to persuade Grant to do?

   The reverend believes that the point of education is to relieve pain and hurt (what he tries to do, even if he has to lie to do it). Teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic—what Grant does—is not enough. Even though he did not attend college, Reverend Ambrose says he knows his people, while Grant, the so-called educated one, is ignorant of them and their needs. In urging Grant to speak to Jefferson about the need to square himself with God before he dies, the reverend points out that the black people in the quarter—especially Tante Lou and Miss Emma—have scrimped, saved, and sacrificed so that the children in their care could blossom and thrive. They did this not anticipating anything in return, but hoping that these children, once grown, would "come back and help relieve the pain." So even if Grant has to lie to Jefferson (since Grant himself does not believe in God), the reverend contends that he has an obligation to do so to honor the wishes of Miss Emma and Tante Lou.

Chapter 28

1. How does Grant honor Reverend Ambrose's request?

   Reverend Ambrose had asked Grant to lie to Jefferson, if need be, to encourage him to embrace God before he died. While he admits to Jefferson that he does not pray, Grant says he believes in God ("I think it's God that makes people care for people . . .").

2. What biblical reference does Jefferson make, and what is the impact of this allusion?

   Jefferson compares himself to Jesus Christ—"Me to take the cross." This evokes a range of images—Jesus wrongly accused, the innocent being killed by representatives of an uncaring power structure, a person being made to carry the burdens of others on his shoulders.

Chapter 29

1. Describe the difference between the first-person narration in this chapter—the only one with a chapter title—and the first-person narration in the rest of the novel. How would you characterize the narrative tone? How does the shift in narrator affect readers?

   Unlike the rest of the novel, in which the narrative voice is educated, even erudite, the narrator in this chapter is barely literate. The chapter is filled with errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar, plus run-on sentences. The impact is powerful, however, because for the first time readers hear from Jefferson in his own voice. Interestingly, Jefferson offers some keen insights into religion, the segregated South, the human condition, and his own plight. He says, for instance, "it look like the lord just work for wite folks," and ". . . holin the botle up so the lord could see it an sayin i kno you don't love nobody but wite folks cause you they god not mine." He expresses love and compassion for Grant, his nannan, and the children who visited him. He shows a keen insight into Paul's character, noting that he is the only one in the prison who speaks to Jefferson like a human being. He is touched by the gifts from the children. He has taken Grant's "lesson" to heart, and readers ache for him, knowing what fate awaits him.

2. In what ways does the "lesson" that Grant tries to teach Jefferson change him?

   Jefferson realizes that his life has meaning because he is a human being who can appreciate the compassion of others, including the children from Grant's school who visit him. He understands and cherishes his nannan's *love and he appreciates what Grant has tried to do to make him realize his humanity in the face of an unjust and inhumane system.*

Chapter 30

1. How do the vignettes in this chapter build suspense as the novel proceeds to its inexorable conclusion?

   These vignettes juxtapose everyday life going on as usual—someone going to mow a lawn, people hanging out in the Rainbow Club, the minister saying his prayers, the sheriff eating his breakfast, someone sweeping the sidewalk—with the highly unusual preparations for an execution. This kind of juxtaposition sweeps readers along, building suspense, and makes readers think about how events of varying magnitude occur simultaneously.

Chapter 31

1. How do the black people in the quarter show their respect to Jefferson on the day of his execution?

   No black people are working, some are praying in church, and the children in the school are on their knees praying until word comes that the execution has been carried out.

2. What does Jefferson mean by his last words: "Tell Nannan I walked"?

   Jefferson wants his godmother to know that he walked straight and tall, like a man, to the electric chair. He took Grant's words and "lesson" to heart and showed dignity in the face of injustice.

3. What does Grant's decision not to attend Jefferson's execution reveal about the development of his character?

   As Grant waits for word that the execution is finished, he castigates himself for refusing Jefferson's request that he stand witness. Jefferson can stand at the execution, but Grant, failing Jefferson, cannot bring himself to be present. In this way, the author shows us that Grant's journey toward manhood is not finished. Grant recognizes his cowardice and his failings. He also recognizes that the Rev. Ambrose, whom he has disdained, is a stronger man than he. He also questions his own lack of faith, as he prays, in a manner, to Jefferson, asking for his forgiveness. By praying to Jefferson, Grant also is humbling himself, as believers do when they pray to God.

4. When Grant says, "I am a slave," what does he mean?

   Grant's statement comes at the end of a soliloquy about belief. He is wrestling with his own lack of faith and with what he now recognizes is the need for faith. In his anger at the injustice of Jefferson's execution, he lashes out, "Don't tell me to believe in the same God or laws that men believe in who commit these murders." And then, in the next breath, he recognizes that his aunt, Miss Emma, the Rev. Ambrose and others of the quarter "must believe . . . They must believe, if only to free the mind, if not the body." With this recognition, Grant is acknowledging the liberating power of faith. Grant is admitting that he has been enslaved not only by the oppression of segregation but most important, by his own lack of faith and his bitterness.

5. How does the last exchange, between Grant and Paul, after they shake hands, reflect the overall theme of the novel?

   By interacting as equals, as friends (a word that echoes Grant's plea to Jefferson to be his friend in Chapter 23), Grant and Paul express their humanity to each other—just as Jefferson learned to express his own humanity. Despite the rules enshrined in law and custom in the segregated South, these two people—one white, one black—recognize that they share a common humanity, and a friendship forged under terrible circumstances. Miss Emma asked Grant to visit Jefferson in prison to make him recognize and honor his humanity. In the process, Grant and Paul also learned a "lesson" about the need to see beyond the social stratification that compromises their humanity in the segregated South.

A Lesson Before Dying

Chapter 1

1. Explore the significance of the opening sentence. Consider the manner in which the sentence introduces a central theme of the novel—the search for manhood. "I was not there, yet I was there."

2. Compare and contrast how the prosecutor's argument differs from the public defender's argument.

3. From whose perspective is the story of the robbery and shooting told? Is this story presented as fact or as a subjective account?

Chapter 2

1. Why does Miss Emma want Grant to visit Jefferson in prison?

2. When Miss Emma first speaks to Grant after the verdict and sentencing, the narrator observes that "The pain I saw in that face came from many years past." What does the narrator mean by that?

Chapter 3

1. How does Henry Pichot's insistence that Jefferson "did it" redirect the plot narrative?

2. Miss Emma keeps saying that Grant "doesn't have to go" to visit Jefferson in prison. The narrator comments, "She was looking at me but not seeing me, and not meaning what she was saying, either." What is Grant implying by this, and what does he think she means?

3. What does the back door of Henri Pichot's plantation house symbolize to Grant and his aunt? Why does having to enter the plantation house through the back door rankle Grant?

4. How does Miss Emma prevail on Henri Pichot to speak to the sheriff on her behalf?

Chapter 4

1. In describing Bayonne, the narrator mentions that the town's major industries include "a slaughterhouse, mostly for hogs." How does this echo and expand on the public defender's summation in Jefferson's trial in Chapter 1?

2. Several times in the course of the novel, including Chapter 4, the narrator expresses the need to get away from the town where he lives. Explain why he feels compelled to flee and what keeps him there despite the urge to leave.

Chapter 5

1. Grant is in a foul mood in this chapter, and he appears to lash out at the children. Why is he in such a terrible mood? To whom does he compare the students in his diatribe, and what is the point he is trying to convey to them?

2. The unspoken "rules" that govern social relations between whites and black in the segregated South require blacks to intuit signs and meanings. In writing of Farrell Jarreau, the black handyman for Henri Pichot, the narrator says, "To learn anything, he had to attain it by stealth or through an innate sense of things around him." How does this kind of stealth undermine one group's sense of humanity and keep members of that group in a subservient position?

Chapter 6

1. The scene in which Grants meets with Sheriff Guidry, Henri Pichot, Louis Rougon, and the fat man is choreographed like a ballet. How does Grant sidestep the land mines in this scene, and what rhetorical devices does he use to get what he wants?

2. In announcing his decision, the sheriff says, "I'd rather see a contented hog go to that chair than an aggravated hog. It would be better for everybody concerned." What does his word choice here say about the sheriff's attitude toward black people as well as his feeling about community life in his parish?

Chapter 7

1. What is the significance of the fact that Dr. Joseph repeatedly calls Grant by the wrong name?

2. When describing the superintendent's examination of the black students' teeth, Grant notes, "At least Dr. Joseph had graduated to the level where he let the children spread out their own lips, rather than using some kind of crude metal instrument. I appreciated his humanitarianism." What is the narrator's tone in this observation?

3. What does Grant compare the superintendent's examination of the children's teeth to? What motif does this continue to establish?

Chapter 8

1. The story the narrator recounts of the mulatto teacher, Matthew Antoine, exudes a strong tone of futility. How does this dovetail with the overall tone of the book?

2. How does Matthew Antoine's experience mirror the narrator's? How is it different?

3. And how does Matthew's experience echo that of the mulattos in Chapter 25?

4. How does Matthew contribute to the overall theme of the novel?

Chapter 9

1. How does the physical structure and setting of the courthouse reflect the social stratification in late-1940s Louisiana?

2. The narrator says that Jefferson had been "thinking too much the past few weeks." What was he thinking about and how does his tone reflect his state of mind at this point in the story?

Chapter 10

1. Why is the narrator so angry at his aunt?

2. Miss Emma keeps saying she does not want to be a "burden" on anybody and she does not want Grant to go to the prison if it is a "burden." What is the subtext here?

Chapter 11

1. How does Jefferson's reaction to the food Grant brings to the prison reflect his state of mind?

Chapter 12

1. What do Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis represent to the narrator?

2. Why does the narrator want to run away? What keeps him there?

Chapter 13

1. How does Reverend Ambrose's appearance at this point in the story introduce the theme of religious versus secular understanding?

Chapter 14

1. This chapter incorporates images of and references to love, faith, and death. Cite particular places where these concepts appear and how they relate to each other and to the story as it has unfolded up to this point.

Chapter 15

1. Tension roils beneath the surface of this chapter. Explain the source of the tension and how it plays out.

Chapter 16

1. In this chapter the narrator is not present for a scene he needs to describe. How does the author finesse this so readers know what happened in the absence of the narrator?

2. Why does Grant want to stop visiting Jefferson in jail? What makes him go back?

Chapter 17

1. Delicate negotiations occur to arrange for Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Jefferson's other visitors to meet with him the dayroom, rather than in his prison cell. How and why is the sheriff persuaded to change his mind about where Jefferson can see his visitors?

Chapter 18

1. How does Grant attempt to get through to Jefferson during his prison visit recounted in this chapter?

2. Explain the biblical allusion inherent in the exchange between Grant and Jefferson regarding Christmas and Easter.

3. What does the narrator mean when he comments that Paul Bonin, the deputy sheriff, "had come from good stock"?

Chapter 19

1. Explain the significance of the Christmas play at the church. What does the sole gift under the tree signify? Who is the intended recipient? Why did so many people attend this event this year in comparison to years past?

Chapter 20

1. Describe the mood when Sheriff Guidry tells Grant and Reverend Ambrose about the date of Jefferson's execution.

Chapter 21

1. According to the narrator, how does Jefferson's plight exemplify the plight of black men in the segregated South?

2. How does Jefferson have it within his power to break the vicious circle the narrator describes to Vivian in this chapter?

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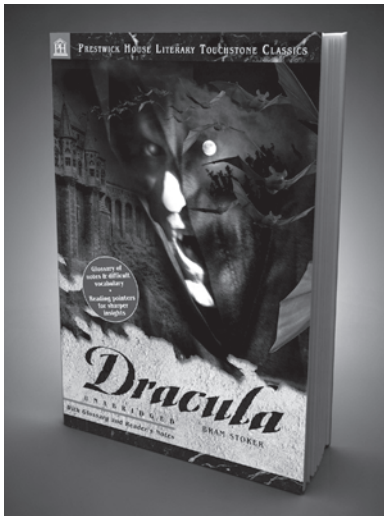

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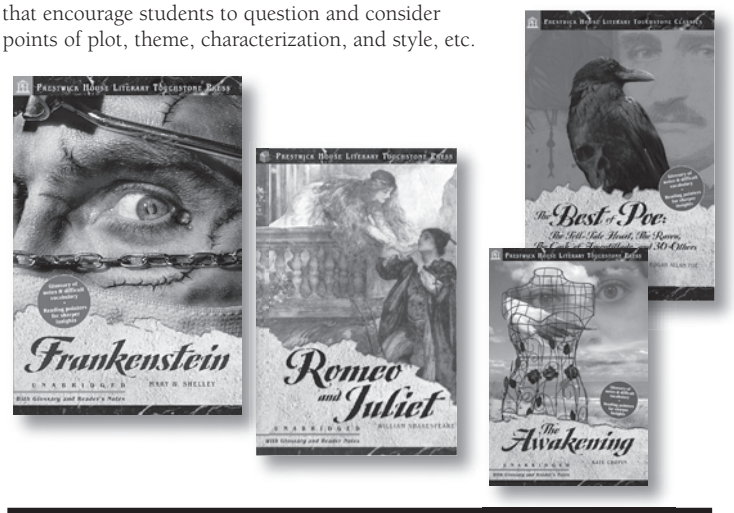

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