Teaching Ernest Gaines’ A Lesson Before Dying

This award-winning book is set in Louisiana in the late 1940s, when that part of the nation seemed little removed from the separation of opportunity that characterized it during the times of slavery. The pivotal character is Jefferson, a young black man who is the unwitting party to the robbery of a store in which three others are killed. Though innocent, he is charged, tried, convicted, and sentenced to die in the electric chair. His story is narrated by Grant Wiggins, another young black man. Unlike Jefferson, Grant has an education. He has returned to his home parish to teach the black children in the plantation school. Grant and Jefferson meet when Grant’s aunt and Jefferson’s grandmother prevail upon Grant to teach Jefferson to read and write before he is executed. The story, then, becomes about the changes that come in both men as a result of their interactions.

While racism and prejudice born of a lack of knowing are uppermost in the novel, the story it tells raises numerous other themes—the benefits of education and self-knowing being among them. So, too, are love and redemption, community values, social dynamics and conventions, familial roles and responsibilities, and justice and the use of the death penalty. Together, the themes bring forth issues of the history of black people in the South and, by extension, the history of America. But on the larger scale, the book examines what it means to be human, and to strive for dignity in a universe that seems uncaring.

The breadth and depth of the themes of the book lend to its being used in a variety of courses, not just literature courses. And because all entering freshmen already will have the book from Orientation, it can be added to a course syllabus without expense to the student. The book itself is written in an easily accessible style, and is relatively compact (256 pages).

Co-curricular Programming and Outside Events

Blog Contest
Stillhouse Press, a student-run small press housed on campus, is offering two blog contests, one based on students’ reading and discussing the text and the second based on experiencing Gaines’ visit to campus. Details are available at Stillhousepress.org. The contest is intended to make students more aware of shaping and controlling the content of a piece of writing, while also drawing distinctions between different purposes and audiences for different pieces of writing. Students can submit their blog posts to Stillhouse, where editors will judge them and award two $100 prizes to the winning students. Further information about blog writing contest is below.

Write a 250-500 word personal reflection on Ernest Gaines’s A Lesson Before Dying. Topics might include:
• Connecting Gaines’ story (and the issues it deals with like race and inequality) to your life.
• The impact reading the book or hearing Gaines speak had on you. Did it change the way you think about yourself, race, friendship, or what it means to be human?
• Connecting the themes of the book to current events.
• There are many ways to approach this post, so be creative.

Winning posts will include:
• a catchy title
• a strong first sentence, or “lede”
• an obvious theme; by the end of the first paragraph, the reader should have a clear sense of the who, what, when, where and why of the piece, including the overarching themes you intend to explore
• an engaging voice; this isn’t an academic paper, so don’t be afraid to use “I”
• give your reader background information you think is necessary for them to know (For example: What else has Gaines written? What does he do? Has he won any awards? Is there any other important information that you should highlight?)
• embedded hyperlinks to your sources
• relevant images, attached in jpeg or png format (with hyperlinks to the source, if pictures are not your own)
• your bio (2-3 sentences) + a picture of yourself (please attach as a jpeg)
• This post should not be a review of Gaines’ book or reading. You can of course talk about how you felt reading the book or listening to Gaines speak, but this is not a book report. Assume your readers have also read the book. You can refer to an aspect of the plot you’re talking about, including quotes from the book, but you don’t have to summarize the entire book.
• Submission by September 20

Essay Contest
In a similar vein, the Mason Reads planners are setting up an essay contest complete with writing prompts. Details are available at MasonReads.gmu.edu. Here, the staff running the contest have posted thought-provoking analytical questions to which students can write their responses.

The planners of the essay contest have recruited panels of volunteers so that the entries can be read quickly but judged fairly, and the winners can be recognized at the event featuring Ernest Gaines during Fall for the Book on Sept. 28. The deadline for entries is September 16. The winner will receive $250 and the second-place finisher will receive $200. Submit all essays at masonreads.gmu.edu

Questions to which students can respond: (Note that the pattern they follow is to invite students to think about the novel and to relate what they are reading in it to what they might observe in the world around them. Similar prompts could be developed for numerous other aspects of the book and the story it tells.)
1. Explain the role of women in the novel. What was their function in this society? Was their contribution and sacrifice recognized? How have things changed or stayed the same between the late 1940s and 2015?

2. Education is very important in the novel, both its attainment and the lack thereof. Contrast the opinions of education presented in this novel. Why do some seek it and others consider it a burden? What roles does it play in the characters’ lives and the life of the community? What role does education play in modern America?

3. Grant’s fight with the mulatto sharecroppers demonstrates his anger and frustration. Why are the sharecroppers’ comments about Jefferson particularly hurtful? What might the scene tell us about racial tensions in Louisiana in the 1940s. How has this changed or stayed the same in America over the past 70 years?

**Ernest Gaines Speaks**

In addition, instructors can ask students to write academic papers out of reading the text and discussing the themes and issues the text raises, or they can ask students to write experientially after attending Gaines’ event on campus on Monday, Sept. 28, at 7:30 in Eagle Bank Arena.

**Additional Programs (dates TBD)**

Students also have other event opportunities out of which they can write—after seeing a movie based on the book, or after eating the southern food featured at a related event sponsored by the planners of Mason Reads. To facilitate their writings, students could be asked to keep journals in which they are required to note a variety of details, the specifics of which can be based on the course they are taking and how the book fits in with course requirements. For examples of writing prompts, see the further information below about the essay contest.

There are numerous thematic areas for discussion of the book, which can be tailored to fit appropriately in a wide array of courses:

**Literary Considerations and Possible Questions**

*Themes, structure and plot, narrative and point of view*

Most of the novel is narrated directly by Grant Wiggins. He begins the book with self-contradictory lines: “I was not there, yet I was there.” Two later segments of the book are narrated through notes that Jefferson writes from prison, where he awaits execution. And then the execution itself is managed through the points of view of several other characters.

Possible questions:
- Is Grant reliable in his narration?
- Is he believable?
- Is he central to the action of the story or removed from it?
- Why does Gaines use him for most of the story and then switch to other modes and narrative voices?
- To which of these various characters does the “lesson” in the title apply?

Characters and character development
Possible questions:
- Which character is the central one in this book? Or, to put it another way, about which character is the story being told?
- Which character changes the most over the course of the story told here? What does that mean in terms of the significance of the story itself? The nature of the novel? That is, if Grant is the protagonist, what is the role of Jefferson? And how are their lives intertwined and to what purpose, in the context of this story?
- How are the other characters affected by the story and how do they, in turn, affect the story’s outcome? Are there other characters who influence Grant over the course of the story?
- Late in the novel, Gaines presents diary entries that he creates for Jefferson. What do those entries represent about Jefferson, his nature, and the development of his character over the course of the story that Gaines tells?
- As a teacher, Grant approaches his work in one way in the beginning of the novel and another later, especially in the climatic final scenes. How does his attitude shift and what does that represent about him and his development as a central character in the story?

Conflicts
Numerous conflicts run through the novel: between Grant and Jefferson, within Grant himself, within Jefferson, between Grant and his students; between the white businessmen who govern the parish and the blacks who also live there; within the law enforcement officers who are involved in the execution.

Possible questions:
- How do those conflicts shape the actions of the characters?
- A key conflict is within Jefferson over what he wants but that also takes the form of a conflict between him and others in terms of what they want for him. What are the implications of those separate wants?

Figurative language and symbolism
Writers usually employ such devices as imagery, similes and metaphors, and the like to help readers envision the details and meanings of a story. By using a first-person narrator for much of this narrative, Gaines has to make some different choices regarding language and literary devices.

Possible questions:
- What are they literary devices Gaines uses? How do they govern the nature of his narrative?
- Does he still work in some figurative aspects? What do they contribute to the whole effect of the book, if anything?
- Gaines has told interviewers that he does not intentionally weave symbols into his work and yet readers and critics say they see them there. What symbols does Gaines employ? That is, what persons, places or things in the narrative have significance beyond their literal meaning or a reader’s literal understanding of them?

*Biography of Gaines and relationship to this story*

Gaines was born in Louisiana in January, 1933. He grew up in an area known as River Lake Plantation, near New Roads, Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana, and he uses that real-world territory to inform his imagined setting of Pichot plantation, near Bayonne, St. Raphael Parish. The black community in which he grew up becomes what he refers to in the novel as the quarter. The cane fields he describes as belonging to his character Henri Pichot are drawn from fields he worked as a teenager. Discuss the ways the creations that Gaines gives his readers exemplify the times, the region, and the country of his youth and early adulthood. Consider the way Gaines connects his characters to the land, and his representations of their choices, limitations, speech patterns and thought processes. Consider how readers may extrapolate from his creations to “know” a place and a time that is not their own.

*Social aspects: Culture and history*

Possible questions:
- Over the course of the novel, Grant Wiggins interacts with numerous characters, both black and white. These interactions reveal facts about him (as a character) but also about the times and racially structured society in which Gaines has set his novel. What is the significance of those interactions in the context of the story and how can we as readers extrapolate from them to determine what Gaines is portraying about that time and place? Is his portrayal accurate?
- When Jefferson’s grandmother and Grant’s aunt want to intercede on Jefferson’s behalf, they cannot go directly to the white men who are prominent in the community. What does that show about the times and the structure of the society? Is this a matter of race or gender? To whom do they go seeking help as they go about their quest?
- Though narrated in the first person through Grant’s perspective, Gaines works into the story a rich evocation of the plantation and parish he imagines for his setting. Are those realistic evocations and representations? Accurate?
- The scope of the story is focused rather tightly on this particular set of events, though Gaines does a lot to show how these events reflect a time and a place in particular ways. As a whole, does Gaines suggest that the times and the place, and the mores that govern it, have changed since the time period of his story? In what ways does he seem to see things changing and not changing since the 1940s? With specific regard to race relations, how have things changed the time in which Gaines’ novel is set and the present day? How have they remained the same?