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Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the heart of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating the intricate details of the time and place can assist us in comprehending the motivations of the characters. In this lesson, use cultural and historical contexts to begin to explore the novel.

A Lesson Before Dying is set in the 1940s, a gap between two very important eras in American history—the period of Reconstruction following the U. S. Civil War but before the Civil Rights movement began in earnest in the 1950s. The economy of the South was still primarily based on agriculture. Sharecropping—tending a portion of another person’s land in exchange for a percentage of the crops—was common among both black and poor white families.

Discussion Activities

Copy Handout One, “Sharecropping,” and Handout Two, “The Pre-Civil Rights South,” and have your students read them in class. Gaines has said that one of the reasons he started to write was so he could memorialize the Louisiana of his boyhood and the people who lived there. On page 25, Grant describes the fictional setting of the novel:

Bayonne was a small town of about six thousand. [. . .] The courthouse was there; so was the jail. [. . .] There were two elementary schools uptown, one Catholic, one public, for whites; and the same back of town for colored. Bayonne’s major industries were a cement plant, a sawmill, and a slaughterhouse, mostly for hogs.

Ask your students to locate other descriptions of the setting in Chapters 1-4. Based on what they learned from listening to the CD and reading the handouts, how accurate are Gaines’ depictions of a small Southern town in the 1940s?

Writing Exercise

Many of the characters in *A Lesson Before Dying* live on a former plantation that is farmed by sharecroppers. Ask students to write a one-page essay on the way Henri Pichot treats Inez and Miss Emma in Chapter 3. Does he treat them with respect? Based on what students learned from the handouts, can they understand why Inez and Miss Emma defer to him? What can we learn about the culture of 1940s Louisiana from reading their exchange?

Homework

Read Chapters 5-9 (pp. 33-74). What differences do you see between Grant’s classroom and yours? How does his role as a teacher influence the way he views himself and others?