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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Profound questions raised by the story allow the character (and the reader) to explore the meaning of human life and extract themes. Themes investigate topics explored for centuries by philosophers, politicians, scientists, historians, and theologians. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, personal moral code in relation to political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational commitments. A novel can shed light on these age-old debates by creating new situations to challenge and explore human nature.

Use the following themes, as well as ones students identify, to determine the themes of *A Lesson Before Dying*. Which themes seem most important? Why?



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises.

Using historical references to support ideas, explore the statements that *A Lesson Before Dying* makes about the following themes:

Racial Injustice: “They sentence you to death because you were at the wrong place at the wrong time, with no proof that you had anything at all to do with the crime other than being there when it happened” (p. 158).

1. Has Jefferson been treated unjustly? Would a young white man in the same situation have been punished as severely? Why or why not?
2. How have Grant, Tante Lou, Miss Emma, and Reverend Ambrose suffered from racial injustice? How has each responded?

Commitment: “You hit the nail on the head there lady—commitment. Commitment to what—to live and die in this hellhole, when we can leave and live like other people?” (p. 29).

1. Why doesn't Grant leave? Why did he come back after he left the first time? Why won't Vivian support his desire for both of them to leave?
2. How does Grant explain “obligation” to Jefferson? Why does he bother? Does Grant practice his concept of obligation?

Manhood: “Do you know what his nannan wants me to do before they kill him? The public defender called him a hog, and she wants me to make him a man” (p. 39).

1. How does Miss Emma define manhood? How does Grant?
2. The final entry in Jefferson's journal is, “good by mr wigin tell them im a man. . .” How does Jefferson define manhood?



Homework

Students should begin working on their essays. See “Essay Topics” at the end of this guide. For additional questions, see the Reader's Guide “Discussion Questions” (pp. 14-15). Outlines are due at the end of next class.