

HIGH SCHOOL | BLUE VALLEY DISTRICT NOVEL RATIONALE

## ***A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest J. Gaines**

### **English Language Arts, 12th Grade**

#### WHAT'S THE STORY?

Set in the fictional community of Bayonne, Louisiana, in the late 1940s, *A Lesson Before Dying* tells the story of Jefferson, a twenty-one-year-old uneducated black field worker wrongfully accused and convicted of the robbery and murder of a white man, and sentenced to death by electrocution. At his trial, Jefferson's court-appointed defense attorney argues that Jefferson lacks the intelligence to plan a robbery, and that, even if he had been involved in the killing, sentencing him to death would be like putting a hog in the electric chair. In spite of this so-called defense, the all-white jury finds Jefferson guilty. To compound the horror of his situation, Jefferson internalizes the attorney's racist depiction of him as a dumb animal.

Determined that Jefferson will die with dignity, his godmother ("nannan"), Miss Emma, turns to Grant Wiggins, a black teacher at the local plantation school, and asks him to teach Jefferson to be a man. Although convinced that there is nothing he can do, Grant reluctantly agrees to visit Jefferson in jail. Over the next several months, while Jefferson awaits execution, he and Grant forge a bond that enables both men to regain their dignity, reconnect with their community, and learn "the importance of standing."

#### CONNECTIONS TO CURRICULUM\*

*The following are some, but not all, of the connections to curriculum for this novel.*

- **Unit 1: Language and Perspective**
  - Essential Question: "How does language influence perspective?"
- **Unit 2: Complex Issues**
  - Essential Questions: "How can examining complex issues from different perspectives influence people?" "How can we effectively present ideas and address other viewpoints?"
- **Unit 3: Personal Responsibility**
  - Essential Question: "How does personal responsibility affect not only the individual but also the world as a whole?"
- **Unit 4: Universal Human Experience**
  - Essential Question: "How can reading reveal universal truths about the human experience?"

#### KEY STANDARDS ADDRESSED

- Read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems. RL.12.13
- Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text. RL.12.2
- Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging. RL.12.5
- Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain. RL.12.1
- Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grades 11–12 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies. RL.12.11
- Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama. RL.12.3
- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. RL.12.4
- Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant. RL.12.6
- Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem, evaluating how each version interprets the source text. RL.12.7
- Demonstrate knowledge of foundational works of American and world literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics. RL.12.9
- Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading. RL.12.10
- Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings. RL.12.12