

A Lesson Before Dying

Study Guide

Chapter One

1. Who is the narrator of this story?
2. Why is Jefferson on trial?
3. Describe the jury for Jefferson's trial.
4. What is the setting for this story?
5. Based on Jefferson's lawyer's arguments, explain why the defense attorney did a poor job.
6. What are the jury's verdict and the judge's sentence?

Chapter Two

1. Who is waiting for Grant when he gets home from school?
2. What did these women want from Grant and why?
3. How does Grant react to their suggestion?
4. Why does Grant end up going to Henri Pichot's house with the women?
5. We now know who the narrator is. Why might the author have chosen to tell the story from the first-person point-of-view?

Chapter Three

1. What is the tie between Miss Emma and Henri Pichot? How does this tie figure into the ladies' scheme?
2. What pieces of information does the author reveal about Grant in the early part of this chapter?
3. Reread the section of this chapter where Henri Pichot comes to the kitchen to speak with Miss Emma. Explain what is happening with Grant's eyes shifting.
4. What is the agreement arrived at by the end of the chapter? What can you infer from Pichot's comments?

Chapter Four

1. Why does Grant try to hurt his aunt when he tells her he will be eating in Bayonne?
2. Name some of the ways the town of Bayonne is divided between whites and blacks.
3. Grant is feeling terrible and calls someone named Vivian. What do you learn about her in this chapter?
4. In Grant's confusion and anger, he flings many questions at Vivian, all dealing with his job of making Jefferson into a man. List some of the questions he asks her. Do you think he is really asking himself the questions?
5. At the end of all these questions, how does Vivian respond?

Chapter Five

1. Describe briefly Grant's school.
2. How does Grant discipline his students?
3. What kind of lives do his students live?
4. What is Grant's subject for the lecture he delivers that day?
5. What is the message that is delivered to Grant at the end of the afternoon?

Chapter Six

1. What time does Grant arrive at the Pichot house for his 5:00 appointment? When does he actually get to talk to Pichot and Sheriff Guidry?
2. Why does Grant refuse to sit down or take any supper while he is waiting?
3. What is the bet between Pichot and Mr. Louis?
4. When the men enter the kitchen where Grant is waiting, Grant tries to decide how he should respond to them. What are his thoughts? What is his main difficulty?
5. What are the terms of the visitation Guidry finally agrees to?

Chapter Seven

1. Why is Grant upset by the superintendent's visit to Grant's school?
2. Explain the irony about Dr. Joseph looking at the students' mouths and teeth.

Chapter Eight

1. What memory does the delivery of firewood to the school prompt?
2. Why did Antoine hate Grant?
3. Antoine hated being in the plantation school, why did he stay?

Chapter Nine

1. This chapter depicts other ways blacks are separated from whites in this town. What are the two examples given here?
2. Describe Paul, the prison guard. What does Grant think of him?
3. Summarize the first meeting with Jefferson.

Chapter Ten

1. What happens on the fourth visit that Grant is upset about?

Chapter Eleven

1. Why does Jefferson ask if Grant has brought corn for his meal?
2. What argument does Grant try with Jefferson to get him to eat, talk, and try to get through the ordeal with dignity?

Chapter Twelve

1. Why does Grant go to the Rainbow Club after his solo visit with Jefferson?
2. While Grant is at the Rainbow Club, who are the other customers discussing? Why is this man important to them?
3. Vivian insists that Grant cannot leave this community. What reason does she give?

Chapter Thirteen

1. Who is going to visit Jefferson in the beginning of this chapter?
2. Why is Grant not living in California, and why is this an important piece of information for the story?

Chapter Fourteen

1. What things does Grant show Vivian when she surprises him with a visit?

Chapter Fifteen

1. What is Vivian's background?
2. How do Tante Lou and her friends react upon meeting Vivian?

Chapter Sixteen

1. What plans are being made in the beginning of this chapter?
2. What surprising thing happens when Miss Emma and her group visit Jefferson?
3. Miss Emma is now even more upset than she had been and insists that Grant return to Jefferson's cell and continue to work with him. What reason does she give for wanting him to go back?

Chapter Seventeen

1. Which white man is Grant beginning to trust? Explain why.
2. Grant has an interesting and unexpected reaction to Jefferson's nasty comments, implying bad things about Vivian. What is the reaction and why is it unexpected?
3. What is different about the visitation rules after this visit?

Chapter Eighteen

1. In their first dayroom visit, Grant brings up the words "moral obligation" for discussion with Jefferson. Why?
2. Grant often stays with Jefferson even after the prisoner has shut down and refuses to speak. Is this due to his increasing interest in helping Jefferson?
3. Define foreshadowing. List some phrases at the end of the chapter that signal a shift in the plot.

Chapter Nineteen

1. Christmas has arrived and, with it, the annual Christmas program at Grant's school. What is different about this event this year?

Chapter Twenty

1. Why has the governor chosen the second Friday after Easter for Jefferson's execution?
2. How long does Jefferson have to live?

Chapter Twenty-one

1. So far in the story, we have met three teachers. Now we are told that there is another supporting character who also wants to be a teacher. Who is it?
2. How does Vivian handle the news about the execution date?
3. On pages 166-167, Grant tries to explain a very complex phenomenon he believes is in play in the community. Briefly summarize his explanation.

Chapter Twenty-two

1. How does Grant know that Paul does not want to search him before his visits with Jefferson? What does this imply?

2. This chapter contains the first real conversation that Grant and Jefferson have. What does Jefferson get excited about?

3. Grant gets a brilliant idea during their conversation. What is it?

Chapter Twenty-three

1. Things do not go well during the next visit from Miss Emma, Aunt Lou, and the Reverend Ambrose. Why are they upset with Grant?

2. Grant is beginning to get excited about working with Jefferson. What happens to give him some inkling that he is beginning to reach Jefferson?

3. List the three things Grant brings to the cell with him and their effect on Jefferson.

Chapter Twenty-four

1. Briefly describe what happens during the next visit that involves Jefferson, Miss Emma, Reverend Ambrose, Tante Lou, and Grant.

Chapter Twenty-five

1. What is Grant feeling good about in the beginning of this chapter?

2. What spoils his mood when he gets to the bar?

Chapter Twenty-six

1. What has Vivian so upset in this chapter?

2. How does Grant take Vivian's concern?

Chapter Twenty-seven

1. Most of this chapter deals with a discussion between Reverend Ambrose and Grant.

What are some of the subjects they discuss?

2. Why is it that Ambrose thinks he is the educated one of the two of them?

Chapter Twenty-eight

1. What evidence is there that Jefferson worked very hard writing in his notebook?

2. What does Grant ask Jefferson to do for his Nannan?

3. Why does Grant tell Jefferson, "You're more a man than I am, Jefferson"? (Pg. 225)

4. What information does the reader find out about execution by the electric chair at the end of the chapter?

Chapter Twenty-nine

1. How is this chapter different from all the rest in the book?

2. What are some surprising things the reader learns from reading Jefferson's thoughts?

Chapter Thirty

1. This chapter is different from the others in its pacing. What has the author done here to increase the tension in this section?

2. What are some of the procedures that need to be taken care of before the execution?

3. What is the function of this chapter?

Chapter Thirty-one

1. How does Grant emphasize the grim importance of this day?

2. How are the others in the black community observing this grim occasion?

3. How long an ordeal has this been for Jefferson and the community?

4. While Grant waits for news of the death, he does a great deal of deep soul-searching. What are his thoughts about?

5. When does Grant see the butterfly? What does the butterfly symbolize?

6. Did Jefferson die a coward or the man Grant was trying to teach him to be?

7. What hope does the author give the reader that the situation in this town has truly changed?

8. The final scene depicts Grant back in the classroom. What reason might one have to believe that he will be a better teacher from this day on?

9. Why would the author have chosen this particular setting for this story? Could this story take place in another setting?