

## *A Lesson Before Dying: Essay Topics*

Write a five paragraph essay with regard to Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*. Choose one of the following topics:

1. Select one of the themes (education, heroism, sacrifice, racism) that run throughout the novel. Develop the theme to show how it is developed. Be sure to include references to the theme through various characters.
2. Choose any three characters that deeply influence Grant's life in either a positive or negative fashion. Describe each briefly and show, by using several examples from the novel, how each help or hinders Grant learning important life lessons.
3. Compare and contrast any two characters in the novel. Be sure to analyze their backgrounds, their personalities, and how each deals with the issues confronting them.
4. Embark on a character study of Vivian. Why does Wiggins include this character in the novel? How does the strand of the story focused on Vivian's relationship with Grant relate to the main storyline involving Grant's interaction with Jefferson? In what ways is Vivian similar to or different from the other female characters (Tante Lou, Miss Emma)?
5. "I saw the transformation," the prison guard tells Grant near the end of the novel, declaring himself a witness to Jefferson's extraordinary progression. To what extent does Grant also undergo a transformation in the narrative? How does the teacher change, what does he learn, and in what ways might his transformation be incomplete? Consider his perspective in the beginning, middle and end of the novel.
6. Explore the depiction of faith and religion in the novel.

Whatever option you choose, you must support your thinking with specific references to the text, including at least three direct quotations. Each quotation may be no more than 2-3 lines. If necessary, use ellipses (...) to highlight the essential phrases.

**Some hints for a successful paper...**

### *You are incorporating MLA Format*

- Provide a catchy and relevant title.
- Include an **introduction** that ends in a thesis statement, which sets up the problem in the essay *Ex: Within the schoolroom, Grant follows rules and imposes discipline; in teaching Jefferson, however, he comes to defy authority and demonstrate compassion.*
- Other ideas for the introduction: you might begin with a catchy (but relevant) opening; incorporate or define some of the key terms found in the thesis statement; why should society be drawn to this particular problem / why is it worthy of investigation).

- Include several **body paragraphs** with at least one quotation (perhaps two) from the book in each. Begin each body paragraph by introducing the particular dimension of the argument/inquiry that you will focus on in this section of the essay (more specific than the thesis statement). Do not begin or end a paragraph with plot summary.
- Include a minimum of **three quotations** from the book in your essay. Set up each quotation by providing some brief context (who, what, when, where, why). Ex: *On Grant's second visit, Jefferson remains dehumanized and hopeless: "And his eyes were just blank—blank, blank, my aunt said. He could have been looking at the wall or the floor, for all the recognition he showed her" (33).*
- Cite all quotations parenthetically, following MLA standards. See above. Each quotation may be no more than 2-3 lines. If necessary, use ellipses (...) to highlight the essential phrases.
- The heart of the paper is **analysis** – that is, your thoughtful exploration of the text. Respond to the quotations from the book that you've selected: What might they mean? What do they reveal? What questions do they raise? How do they help to shed light on the problem that you are focusing on in this essay? How do they support your theories or complicate your assumptions? Pay attention to language and structure—for example, the effect of a particular word or phrase.
- Acknowledge multiple possibilities and alternative points of view—for example, respond to an opposing argument or present more than one way of looking at a particular passage.
- Avoid plot summary.
- Provide a **conclusion** in which you consider overarching insights that have emerged in the writing of the paper as well as any new or lingering questions.
- Use active verbs, and use the "literary present" tense.
- Be sure to avoid second person point of view as well as : "I think...", "In conclusion...", "In my opinion...", "I believe..." or other similar expressions
- Be sure to include transitions between your body paragraphs

Due date \_\_\_\_\_

(You will be turning in the book along with your paper at this time.)