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“I don’t know if you’ll be able to read this, Mr. Wiggins. I can hear my heart beat and my hands shake. But I see the sun coming up in the morning. There is a bird in the sycamore tree. A bluebird. I’m writing it down. Sky, tree, bluebird.

Mr. Wiggins. Tell them I’m strong. Tell them I’m a man.

Sincerely, Jefferson”


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“He saw the verdict was go’n be guilty. So he says, ‘Look at this boy. What kind of justice is this? Backwoods Louisiana. Dirt poor. Knows nothing, is nothing. Not even a human being. I would as soon put a hog in that electric chair. Because that’s what we will be doing, electrocuting a hog.’ That’s what was said, before all the world, while you wasn’t there! Now Jefferson don’t say nothing, except yes, all right, he’s a hog, and they can drag him to that chair and kill him like a hog. That’s what he’s go’n make them do.”

~Emma Glenn, *A Lesson Before Dying*, Romulus Linney
Summary of the Play

A Lesson Before Dying takes place on a plantation in Bayonne County, Louisiana, in 1948. Jefferson, a young African-American man, is arrested and condemned to death for the robbery and murder of a Caucasian shopkeeper. Tagged as a “hog” by his own attorney during the trial, Jefferson takes this message to heart, shutting out any dignity left within him.

Miss Emma, Jefferson’s godmother, knows that her godson is innocent. Yet, because they live in a segregated and racist society, she also realizes that her godson cannot be saved. Miss Emma’s only wish is for Jefferson to die “like a man.” To teach him, she calls on another young man she helped raise, Grant Wiggins, the local school teacher. Grant agrees to meet with Jefferson after much coaxing from Miss Emma.

The meetings, held in the courthouse storeroom, are tedious due to Jefferson’s refusal to believe he is anything more than the “hog”. He is unwilling to learn and unwilling to change. Grant is just as lost as Jefferson, swept up in his hatred for the South, his frustration with his career, and the uncertain future that awaits his students. Many times Grant threatens to never return and it is with some hostility that he continues to counsel his former pupil. Grant’s girlfriend, Vivian, sees how similar Grant and Jefferson are and feels these lessons will benefit them both. It takes the insight of Vivian to convince Grant that what he has to offer as a teacher is more than a textbook education. He has the power to instruct his students to stand up to segregation, racism and hatred. Teachers can instill their students with the dignity others have robbed from them.

Grant is not the only person trying to end his visits. Jefferson also protests to his time in the storeroom, and Bayonne’s sheriff Sam Guidry and local minister Reverend Moses Ambrose are also against them. While Reverend Ambrose is opposed to Grant’s neglect of Jefferson’s religious needs, Sam believes that these visits serve no purpose – what more could Jefferson have to learn days before his execution? He conveys these feelings openly to Grant as well as his deputy, Paul Bonin. While Paul may appear to agree with Sam, he genuinely believes in Jefferson’s innocence.

This gives Grant the motivation to approach his visits with Jefferson differently, knowing that he must inspire his student to embrace his own self image, not the one painted by society. Eventually, Jefferson develops an understanding of himself and his innocence, and grows to respect Grant and others committed to helping him in these finals days. Ultimately, Jefferson loses the hostility that he once had.

Jefferson walks to his execution the way Miss Emma requested: with dignity. Though he still does not understand why he must die, he knows he must be a hero for his supporters, so that he can be “bigger and better” than any man they have ever seen.
Character Breakdown

**Jefferson**
is a young man sentenced to die for the murder of a Caucasian shopkeeper. Abandoned by his parents and raised by Miss Emma, Jefferson turns the racist hatred of his society upon himself and everyone committed to helping him.

**Emma Glenn** is a woman in her seventies. She is Jefferson’s godmother and also helped raise Grant and pay for his education. Emma is a firm believer in her godson’s innocence.

**Grant Wiggins**, mid-twenties, is a plantation teacher in a small Louisiana town. Grant was Jefferson’s former teacher. He is recruited by Aunt Emma to help Jefferson realize the importance of dying with dignity. Grant is frustrated with his life in the South, his life as an educator, and the prospects that await his past and present pupils.

**Vivian Baptiste** is a strong Southern woman, a school teacher and mother of three children. Vivian is sure of herself and her expectations of others. She urges Grant to continue his visits with Jefferson.

**Sam Guidry** is the sheriff of Bayonne with a staunch set of guidelines for the treatment of death row inmates. As a result, Sam is against Grant’s visits to the prison and does not see what good they can do.

**Reverend Moses Ambrose** is the minister for the parish, who attempts to give Jefferson spiritual guidance during his remaining days. Reverend Ambrose believes that religion and faith have the power to save any individual, which places him in direct conflict with Grant.

**Paul Bonin** is a man in his twenties, and the deputy sheriff of Bayonne. Although he rarely admits it aloud, Paul believes Jefferson is innocent, and tries to be as helpful as he can while Jefferson awaits his execution.
JUSTICE: The upholding of what is right, especially fair treatment and due reward in accordance with honor, standards, or law.

ACCORDANCE WITH HONOR

1. HAS JUSTICE BEEN DONE?

*Example from the play (Page 27):*
GRANT. Who shot first?
JEFFERSON. Don't know!
GRANT. Yes, you do! You keeping this all mixed up! Come on!!
JEFFERSON. Grope!
GRANT. Did you tell your laywer that?
JEFFERSON. No!
GRANT. Why not?
JEFFERSON. Say the white man shot first? I ain't no fool!

2. IN WHAT SPECIFIC WAYS HAS JUSTICE NOT BEEN DONE?

*Example from the play (Page 27):*
GRANT. See, Jefferson, this is where it breaks down. That white jury didn't think you were telling the truth, even if you were. You hear me?
JEFFERSON. YES!!

3. WHAT IS THE CORRELATION BETWEEN SOCIETY IN THE PLAY AND OUR SOCIETY TODAY?

*Example from the play (Page 29):*
GRANT. It is the difference between admitting what happened to you and denying it. You did wrong things. All right. I know what happened now. Your white lawyer saw that white jury did not believe your story, or his defense. They believed you were trying to lie your way out of robbery and murder. So he did something that just came naturally to him. He called you a hog. He used contempt for black people to try to get you off. He was a helpless, stupid white lawyer. He never meant you're a hog.
JEFFERSON. What he said.

DISCUSS WAYS THAT OUR SOCIETY AND SOCIETY IN THE PLAY COULD BE MORE JUST.

ACCORDANCE WITH THE LAW

1. SINCE JUSTICE HAS NOT BEEN DONE, WHERE HAS THE LAW FAILED? WHY?

*Example from the play (Page 33)*
GRANT. Twelve white men say a black man must die. Another white man sets the date and time without consulting one black person. No proof the defendant had anything to do with the crime other than being there when it happened. Should be thrown out of court. Instead, white folks set a date convenient to them, not too close to Easter!
**HUMAN RIGHTS**: The basic rights and freedoms to which all humans are entitled, often held to include the right to life and liberty, freedom of thought and expression, and equality before the law.

**RIGHT TO LIFE AND LIBERTY**

1. **HAVE JEFFERSON'S HUMAN RIGHTS BEEN PRESERVED OR VIOLATED?**

   **Example from the play (Page 29):**
   GRANT. He never meant you're a hog.
   JEFFERSON. What he said.
   GRANT. Yes, but now you're saying it and you're using it. And somewhere deep in you, you believe it! You shouldn't have been there. You lied about Grope. When three men were dead, you stuffed money in your pocket and had yourself a big drink. And when that prosecutor nailed it down, what kind of animal you really are, drinking liquor over dead bodies, you thought, all right, that's what I'll be.

2. **IF SO, IN WHAT SPECIFIC WAYS HAS THAT OCCURRED?**

   **Example from the play (Page 17):**
   SHERIFF GUIDRY. I don’t like it, Professor. I never been to college but I learned a thing or two about life in this job. I have to execute this boy, not torture him. I would rather watch a dumb hog die in that chair than an upset, out of his mind, aggravated boy fry in it. I don’t think you’ll make him understand anything.

3. **GIVEN THAT HIS HUMAN RIGHTS HAVE BEEN VIOLATED, IN WHAT WAYS CAN HIS DIGNITY AND HUMANITY BE RESTORED?**

   **Example from the play (Page 24):**
   VIVIAN. All right. Let's calm down, and think this through. Jefferson is young, and terrified. He's lived all his life dirt poor in the country, with kerosene lamps and fireplace heat. Been to town a dozen times in his life? Ever been in a courtroom before? How could he understand what goes on there? He has to be confused. Does Jefferson really understand what happened to him?

   VIVIAN. His lawyer says hog. Miss Emma makes this federal case out of it and says be a man. That's a lot for a boy to live with, alone in a death cell. So he takes refuge in hating us and himself.
   GRANT. That's right, but what can I do about it?

**FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND EXPRESSION**

1. **WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF JEFFERSON'S INABILITY TO SPEAK AND THINK FREELY? WHAT IS THE HUMAN COST?**

   **Example from the play (Page 9):**
   MISS EMMA. It was Jefferson’s own lawyer called him a hog.
   GRANT. The public defender? Why?
   MISS EMMA. He saw the verdict was go’n be guilty. So he says, “Look at this boy. What kind of justice is this? Backwoods Louisiana. Dirt poor. Knows nothing, is nothing. Not even a human being. I would as soon put a hog in that electric chair. Because that’s what we will be doing, electrocuting a hog.” That’s what was said, before all the world, while you wasn’t there! Now Jefferson don’t say nothing, except yes, all right, he’s a hog, and they can drag him to that chair and kill him like a hog. That’s what he’s go’n make them do.
HEROISM: The qualities characteristic of a hero, as courage, bravery, fortitude, unselfishness, etc. and the display of such qualities.

THE DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF A HERO

1. WHO IS THE HERO OF THE STORY?

Example from the play (Page 49):
GRANT. Jefferson, do you know what a hero is? That is a man who does something for other people. Something other men can't do. I'm not a hero. Never will be. I want to run away. That is not a hero. A hero does things for others. Like for your Nannan. Like for the children in the school. A hero would do anything for the people he loves, to make their lives better. And a black hero has to face white people. Not all of them hate us, but a lot of them do. They think we are animals with no dignity, no heart, no love for our people. The last thing they want to see in a black man is the same good things that are in all men and all women. Look at me, Jefferson. We need you, more than you need us. I am a man who doesn't know what to do. I need a hero to tell me what to do, and what kind of man to be. I need you, to teach me that. You can do that, for all of us, me, your Nannan, even Reverend Ambrose. You can be bigger and better than any man you or I have ever met.

2. IS THERE MORE THAN ONE IN THIS STORY? WHAT MAKES THEM HEROIC?

Example from the play (Page 51):
JEFFERSON. You been telling me I'm the one. I got to do everything.
GRANT. I guess I have.
JEFFERSON. How?
GRANT. I don't know how. I just know you can.
JEFFERSON. You do?
GRANT. I do.
JEFFERSON. In one day? That's all I got. How I go'n do that?
GRANT. You will know what to do. Because you're a better man than I am.
JEFFERSON. It make me a better man, 'cause I'm got to die tomorrow?
GRANT. I am having a hard time looking at you, Jefferson. I'm about to fall apart.
JEFFERSON. Well, don't. Do something else.
GRANT. What?
JEFFERSON. Stay here. Teach.

Project Ideas
Create a collage demonstrating all the qualities of a hero. Do any characters in A Lesson Before Dying display these qualities? Can you think of other characters in literature who do? Do you know any heros? Who are they and why?
FAITH: Confident belief in the truth, value, or trustworthiness of a thing, idea, or person.

FAITH IN GOD

1. MISS EMMA AND REVEREND AMBROSE HAVE A STRONG FAITH; GRANT DOES NOT. HOW ARE THEIR WORLD VIEWS DIFFERENT?

Example from the play (Page 36):
REVEREND AMBROSE. I’m going tomorrow. I’m go’n talk about God.
GRANT. Jefferson needs to hear it.
REVEREND AMBROSE. He needs to hear there is a better world than this one, and believe it. But I need your help. He listens to you more than me.
GRANT. I’m sorry. I don’t believe in that other world.
REVEREND AMBROSE. Meaning you educated. Son, you don’t know nothing. I’m the one that’s educated. By life and by death. But you, you look down on me. Just a preacher. Just a liar. What do I preach? You say fairy tales and lies. If so, I tell lies to relieve pain. I preach to people in pain. Oh Pain, when will you stop! When the children of man have grief and sorrow in the awful pain of this life, where is hope? None, there is none, ‘til God speaks. And God says there is hope, there is blessed release from pain and grief, across yon river, and some of us believe! To relieve that pain! Do you hear what I trying to say to you, boy?

FAITH IN PEOPLE

1. GRANT AND JEFFERSON ARE ATHEISTS. CAN THEY FIND FAITH IN SOME OTHER SOURCE?

Example from the play (Page 51):
JEFFERSON. You believe in God, like Reverend Ambrose?
GRANT. No. But you have made me think something makes people care about other people. I believe that, now.

RELIGIOUS IMAGERY

Along with the religious themes present in A Lesson Before Dying, Linney imparts strong religious imagery throughout the play. Jefferson is frequently pictured as a Christ figure, with many parallels to the death of the Christian savior. For example, Jefferson was executed close to Easter between the hours of noon and three in the afternoon. Easter is the religious holiday where Christians celebrate the death and resurrection of Christ, and believe that he was crucified between the hours of noon and three in the afternoon. Also, just as Grant dismissed the children in the school between these hours, and African-Americans in the parish ceased work to observe Jefferson’s passing, so do Christians on Good Friday, the supposed day of Christ’s death. Jefferson is an innocent man condemned to death for a crime he did not commit. Christians hold the same belief of Christ. Biblical accounts of his death claim that Christ was placed on a cross between two criminals, one of whom proclaims, “We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

Challenge Question
What is the difference between religion and faith?

*Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary, Copyright 1996, 1998
*New Revised Standard Bible, Copyright 1989
The World of the Play

*A Lesson Before Dying* takes place in Bayonne County, Louisiana, a town existing only in the pages of the novel. However, Ernest Gaines creates his literary worlds by drawing from his own life and community. The author used Pointe Coupee Parish, his childhood home, to help him create the setting for his novel.

**Pointe Coupee, Louisiana**

Pointe Coupee Parish is located in the heart of Creole French plantation country, the landscape graced by lush fields of sugar cane, cotton and vast pecan orchards.

**FAST FACTS**

*Pointe Coupee Parish is called “The Cradle of Public Education” in Louisiana. In March 1808, Pointe Coupee was the first parish in the state to implement an act providing for parish school boards and establishing public schools.*

*Agriculture is the largest income-producer in Pointe Coupee Parish, with gross revenues of about $50 million annually. While Pointe Coupee is the top pecan producing parish in the state, the agricultural force in the parish also includes sugar cane and cotton, as well as livestock production of beef cattle.*

**THE FRENCH CREOLE COMMUNITY**

A **Creole** is a person descended from or culturally related to original French settlers of the Southern United States, (especially Louisiana) or Spanish and Portuguese settlers of the Gulf States. The word “Creole” comes from Spanish *Criollo* a form of the verb *criar* which means *to bring up*. The French later changed the spelling.

Originally, there were three general groups that made up Creole society:
1) Creoles, Americans, and inhabitants of European origin made up the highest class;
2) free slaves and their descendants made up the middle class;
3) slaves, who were household property, were the lowest class.

Often today, Creole refers not only to their French-based dialect but also to a person of mixed African-American and European ancestry. The Creole community contributed largely to Louisiana culture, especially in architecture, food and music.

*http://www.pcchamber.org/
*http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1992/2/92.02.02.x.html#j
Along with their gorgeous exteriors, the mansions were surrounded by magnificent gardens with old trees and Spanish moss, tons of flowers, and gracious lawns.

The seasoning of food is the key to its authenticity. Rice is an important staple in the Creole kitchen, along with seafood.

Gumbo

Most of the songs of the Creole show a definite influence of the Latin regime of the Spanish and French colonists of Louisiana, and are not dissimilar in origin from African-American spirituals.

FAMOUS PEOPLE AND PARADES

New Orleans, Louisiana, embraces the Creole lifestyle and community through its music, citizens, and cultural events. Just a few of the famous tastes, tunes, people and parades to come out of this community include:

Bryant Gumbel, The Early Show

Mardi Gras

Alphonse "Bois Sec" Ardoin, legendary Creole musician (1914-)

*http://www.arhoolie.com
*http://lsue.edu/acadgate/music/boissec.htm

Challenge Question
If you were to draw from the experiences of your childhood town in writing, how would you characterize that place?
Section II: From The Author to the Playwright

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Romulus Linney
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"I don't know how a man should live. How can I tell a man how he should die? What do I say to him?"

~Grant Wiggins, *A Lesson Before Dying*, Romulus Linney
Ernest James Gaines was born on January 15, 1933 in Pointe Coupee Parish, 30 miles northwest of Baton Rouge. The River Lake Plantation, where his family had resided since the time of slavery, became the foundation for his novels and short stories, using the environment and background to enrich his work. The eldest of twelve children, Gaines spent his days working in fields, earning a mere 50 cents a day for field work. His neighbors, both African-American and Caucasian, found themselves in similar poverty-stricken situations.

In 1940, Gaines’s stepfather and mother moved to San Francisco in search of work. After their departure, he was raised by his great aunt, who became the model for many of the female characters in his novels. Gaines left Louisiana in 1948 at 15 since there was no high school he could attend in Pointe Coupee under segregation laws. He joined his parents in Vallejo, across the bay from San Francisco, and continued his education there.

After graduating high school, Gaines went to community college and served in the armed forces for two years. Upon his return, he attended San Francisco State on the GI Bill. Later, he would study creative writing at Stanford University on a Wallace Stegner Creative Writing Fellowship.

Gaines enjoys a celebrated career with numerous critically acclaimed novels and short stories. Some of his other works include Catherine Carmier, Of Love and Dust, Bloodline, The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, A Long Day in November, In My Father’s House, and A Gathering of Old Men. He has also earned several prestigious awards throughout his life, including the Joseph Henry Jackson award and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation grant. He also won the 1993 National Book Critics Circle Award for A Lesson Before Dying.

Gaines continues to work on novels and other literary projects, and serves as a writer in residence at University of Southwestern Louisiana. He has made his home state his permanent home, where he lives with his wife, Dianne Saulney.

*http://www.oprah.com
A View on Education and Poverty

In this interview from the Baton Rouge Sunday Advocate, Gaines describes the community from his childhood, the world that provides inspiration for his literary environments:

Ernest Gaines remembers the first 15 years of his life in Pointe Coupee Parish: a time of poverty and hard work, of generations of black people stuck on the plantation, getting nowhere, kept down.

“By the ’30s, when I was born, conditions were not too much different from the times of slavery. We were attached to the place,” he said, recalling the plantation his family lived on when he was a child.

“You couldn’t move around and do whatever you wanted to do. During the time I grew up, I understood much of what has been written in books about slavery and the reconstruction period, farm life and plantation life. I could not have written had I not lived it. But I would not wish it on any other child. I went into the fields when I was eight years old. I went into the swamps at 12.”

Gaines considers himself lucky to have gotten out of the parish, which, until the early 1900s, had no high school for blacks.

“Not all kids had the chances I had. It was luck. Those who stayed here, most ended up with very little education, not going to high school at all. Some were luckier. Some could go to high school and some went on to Southern University or to a university in New Orleans.”

Education for blacks in those days was haphazard. Elementary schools for black children were set up in the little churches scattered around the parish. Salaries of the teachers were paid by the white School Board, but the salaries were fractions of the salaries paid white teachers.

“I went to school in a church. We didn’t have a school. You would sit on benches or pews and your desk was your lap. You had your book on your lap; off your knee. Or you turned around and got down on your knees and used your pew as your desk,” he said.

“I was on this plantation, River Lake Plantation, and I went to school there myself. We were supposed to have six months of school, but of course we didn’t. You were lucky if you had five months. School didn’t start until late October and you were out in early April.”

The school year for black children coincided with growing seasons: “We had cotton until the first of October. Then, by middle of April, we began to plant and harvest other things, potatoes and whatever you had in the field. And children whose fathers were sharecroppers had to go into the fields.”

Gaines remembers the little church school. “There was no such thing as inside toilets [at school]. We hauled water from the well to drink. We hauled wood for heat. Real rural.”

In California, Gaines got his high school diploma, and unlike most of the friends he left back in Pointe Coupee, got a college education.

“My other brothers and sisters, the ones born in California, graduated high school, many went to college. All their children went to school. Whereas, the ones left here, not all went to school or finished school.”

An education is meaningful in more than one way, for more than the person getting it. “If you have a group who go to school, they tend to send their children to school. Outside school, in the day-to-day, ‘life was real hard,’” Gaines remembers.

The school bus wouldn’t go the extra distance to pick up Gaines and his friends. “I remember standing on the riverbanks to hitchhike rides or catch a ride on the little country bus that passed by. So, these are things you had to do.”

The hard life, the unfair treatment of blacks, those were part of the way of life and it was accepted, Gaines said.

“I hope it never happens again to anyone. Even when I was growing up there I never thought it was the worst sort of life because everybody else around me was the same way. Everybody was poor. Everybody wore the same clothes, ate the same food, went to school five months, did the same work. That was life. But the older people always thought it was something else and wanted me to do other things.”

*Conversations with Ernest Gaines, Writer Draws on Pointe Coupee Childhood,*
Steve Culpepper and Mary Broussard
Romulus Linney

Biography

Linney was born in Philadelphia in 1931 and raised in the Appalachian town of Madison, Tennessee. He was inspired to pursue theatre by his mother, an amateur actress, and went on to receive a B.A. from Oberlin College and a M.F.A. from the Yale School of Drama. He moved to New York City in 1958 and began his professional career, which has included directing many productions of his own plays.

Romulus Linney has written more than twenty-five plays including The Sorrows of Frederick, Holy Ghosts, Childe Byron, A Woman Without a Name, Sand Mountain, Three Poets and 2. His plays have been produced widely over the past thirty years in theaters across the United States and abroad. Six of his one-act plays have appeared in Best Short Plays, including Laughing Stock, which was also featured in Time Magazine as one of the ten best plays of 1984. He has also written for film and television, including the teleplays The Thirty-Fourth Star (CBS), Feeling Good (PBS), and a film version of his play Holy Ghosts. Many of his stories, essays, and articles have appeared in literary journals such as Pushcart Conjunctions and Kenyon Review. He received the National Critics Award for 2 (in its 1990 Humana Festival production at the Actors Theatre of Louisville) and for his adaptation of his 1962 novel Heathen Valley, which appears in Best Plays of the Year 1987-88. In 1998, Gint, his Appalachian version of Peer Gynt, was invited to the International Ibsen Festival at the Norwegian State Theatre in Oslo.

Mr. Linney has won many other awards including a 1980 Obie for Tennessee, three Hollywood Drama-Logue Awards, the Mishima Prize for Fiction, and the 1984 Award for Literature from the American Academy and Institute for Arts and Letters. He has been awarded two Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), as well as Guggenheim, Rockefeller, and National Foundation for the Arts grants. He has received honorary doctorates from Oberlin College (1994), Appalachian State University (1995), and Wake Forest University (1998). He is a member of the Council of the Dramatists Guild, Inc., Ensemble Studio Theatre, the Fellowship of Southern Writers, National Theatre Conference, College of Fellows of the American Theatre, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and Yaddo. Mr. Linney was formerly chair of the M.F.A. Playwriting program at Columbia University’s School of the Arts and is currently Professor of Playwriting in the Actors Studio M.F.A. Program at the New School in New York.

*http://www.eclipsetheatre.com/pastseasons.php
Revisiting a Mentor: Interview with the Director and Playwright

Edward Sobel, director of *A Lesson Before Dying*, attended the University of Pennsylvania in the late 1980s. It was here that Edward had the opportunity to study with Romulus Linney. In this interview, Edward reconnects with his former teacher to discover his motivations behind creating this adaptation, and the process of transforming the story for the stage.

**E:** Could you start by talking a little bit about what drew you to the book. I know you and Ernest met each other, was it at Sewanee?

**R:** No. We first met each other in 1976, when we were both on the literary panel for the NEA, and Ernest read a section from one of his books, I think it was “A Gathering of Old Men.” It described a people meeting in a very remote farmhouse way back in the boondocks of Louisiana. Well, he and I are very different in so many ways, but my folks come from Western Appalachian North Carolina, and it wasn’t that different. I felt that he got something. Of course, he’s a marvelous, magnificent writer, and I was drawn to that too, but I was drawn to what he was writing. And we became friends. Over the years, we were on various committees together, and we taught at Sewanee together, and belonged to a Southern fellowship of writers. We sort of kept up with each other. So, when the book came out, I read it, and thought it was wonderful of course. I wrote to him and said ‘Ernie, this outta be a play, it’s built like a play.’

**E:** What would you say was the most difficult challenge in adapting it?

**R:** Well, there wasn’t one. The most difficult challenge was in casting it. And this we found, because we had readings of it several times, and it didn’t work out. The reason was, that in Ernie’s book, you know that in the first chapter that Jefferson didn’t do this. But in the play, you don’t know that. This guy is brought in in chains, and he’s a young black man, and is brought in in chains, and the visceral reality of American audiences is, they are liable to suspect him, that maybe he’s guilty, and then it takes a long time to realize that wasn’t true. And we did two readings of it, and the damn thing just didn’t work. Then we did it, had a reading at a theatre in New Brunswick, Crossroads Theatre, and he came up with this young man, and I walked in the theatre, and I saw this young guy just talking to people, and I said ‘Is that him?’ Because he looked perfect. What you need is the perfect actor, and we had that in Jamal Marsh. What you need is a young actor, that when he comes on stage, you know he couldn’t have done it. He’s young. I made him younger than in Ernie’s book. I don’t think that works, to have a man that old. I made him 16-18.

**E:** We’ve tried to make him as young as we could and still have the actor that has the chops to do it.
R: Well, the main thing is, everybody’s coming down on Grant. His woman’s coming after him, and Miss Emma is on top of him to do this impossible thing. And he goes to the jail and they treat him like dirt. In the novel, there’s a wonderful scene that you can’t do, where he goes to the house of the people to whom he’s gotta get permission to do this in the first place. They make him sit around and wait and they humiliate him and do all sorts of stuff. All that I couldn’t get in [the play]. Grant is being…you need them to give Grant hell. Then he comes up against Jefferson, who, in most of the play, gives him hell. That’s kind of the spice of the play. Everybody’s jumping all over Grant, and he’s trying to deal with it. Sent to hell with it all, getting in a fight, and this and that and the other, and slowly coming around and figuring out a way to get to the guy.

E: And that was with MFA students?

R: Yeah. And these were MFA students that were very down to earth - who said, “We want to do this program.” The difficulty with teaching, at the more elite places I taught, I taught a couple of years at Princeton, and six year status of full-professor running the playwriting program at Columbia. And these were wonderful students, and very precocious and so on, but they were all scared. They all had one foot in the water, but they were trying to somehow...somehow, graduate school was a place where they were paying so much money and everything, it was somehow to lessen the danger of it, you know, and that’s not possible. So they would occasionally be very defensive and unhappy. Where at the New School, the kids said ‘we just wanna do this…we just wanna act, and the Actor’s Studio sounds great, let’s go.’ And I managed to get together a very good playwriting program in that school, so I was happy about that.

E: It sounds like you shared some of Grant’s reluctance. And one of the great things about his character is what a reluctant teacher he is, in a way.

R: Yeah, but for different reasons. Grant’s reluctance was because he was so poorly equipped, or rather the school was so poorly equipped. You gotta remember that the counties are like parishes in Louisiana. They didn’t have anything. The old books that have chewing gum in them, stuck together. Only one little mealy thing of chalk to use for the whole year, and stuff like that. So you’ve got a really impossible situation for him to deal with there. Where I taught, things were much better, and my motives were much more selfish. I think Grant’s despair as a teacher is not so much the position itself, but what happens. He has that speech which he shares with Jefferson, which is kind of when Jefferson starts to come around a little bit. He talks about all the students who have left the school and how many them have been killed, gotten into trouble, and what a wretched life some of them have had. So why is he teaching kids to read and go get killed. I think that’s really the thing that’s eating Grant is the same thing that causes the despair of so many African-Americans. Why should I try to do anything in a country that so completely screws me up? But once Grant goes through the process of helping Jefferson, it is of course Jefferson who ennobles Grant. Grant cannot leave after that, he is a different man. He’s not about to leave now. He’s gonna stay there and do his best.

E: What’s sort of the wonderful polarity in the play, isn’t it?

R: You know, Ed, when you’re making a play, you can’t do everything, you gotta figure out what you think are the most important things and stick to that.
According to playwright David Wood, "When I have found a book that I am interested in adapting, I find it fascinating trying to enter the mind of the writer to understand what he or she was really getting at, to analyze the ingredients that make his or her book so popular, and to translate them to another medium. Being faithful to the book does not mean a slavish adherence to every twist of plot; it does not mean that the playwriting is prohibited from inventing dialogue or even new characters. What it does mean is that the spirit of the book must be observed and that the basic story must remain, otherwise why do it in the first place? The very qualities that make a book worth adapting are what should be kept at all costs."

Of course, writing an adaptation does differ from creating a new work in several ways. In a new work, the content may be completely fleshed out or it may be no more than a flicker of an idea. But in an adaptation, the playwright always works from another source: a book, a poem, a nursery rhyme, etc. Also, the elemental differences between the stage and the printed page pose challenges for the adaptor: physical limitations on stage, cast size, and time.

Also, in a book, the author has time to add exposition to develop characters, describe setting, and portray action. The reader then elaborates on that text with his or her own imagination. In a theatre, however, time is limited to less than two hours. This restraint allows the playwright to concentrate on a few key elements of the plot in greater depth.

Another aspect of adaptation that poses an interesting challenge is the development of character. In a book, an author develops a character through many means: narrative prose, describing a character's thoughts or mood, or dialogue between characters. On stage, a character expresses him/herself through a monologue, a gesture, or through interactions with other characters.

Of course, when the author adapts his own work, he is already inside the head of his characters. When another writer approaches a book, he/she must work hard to find an authentic voice for the characters while trying to make the play his/her own, a challenging and exciting process for many playwrights.

Audience expectations also play a significant role in how an adaptation is received. Each person brings his or her own ideas about the staging of a beloved book. It is perhaps the greatest challenge for the adaptor to create a play that satisfies the audience's desires while bringing something new and vibrant to the stage. And that is also one of the greatest rewards in staging an adaptation: being able to breathe new life into a beloved work, helping people experience it in a whole new way.

Other examples of plays adapted from novels include:

- **Of Mice and Men** by John Steinbeck
- **Ragtime** by E.L. Doctorow
- **The Grapes of Wrath** by John Steinbeck
- **Jane Eyre** by Charlotte Bronte
- **The Dead** by James Joyce

*Theatre For Children*, David Wood with Janet Grant. Copyright 1999

*http://www.sct.org/new_tickets/shelf.pdf*
Section III: Foundation for A Lesson Before Dying

Civil Rights and Racism
- Laying the Foundation for the Civil Rights Movement
- Racism

Capital Punishment
- Did you know?
- Capital Punishment Timeline
- Illinois Moratorium on the Death Penalty

The 1940’s: a Global Perspective
“Twelve white men say a black man must die. Another white man sets the date and time without consulting one black person. No proof the defendant had anything to do with the crime other than being there when it happened. Should be thrown out of court. Instead, white folks set a date convenient to them, not too close to Easter! An old woman wants me to stop what’s been going on for three hundred years. A preacher tells me I’m sending a soul to hell. My pathetic excuse for a school turns me into a drill master for robots, and two other black men want to electrocute Jefferson themselves. What’s going to change?"

~Grant Wiggins, *A Lesson Before Dying*, Romulus Linney
Civil Rights and Racism

Laying the Foundation for Civil Rights Movement

Civil Rights were the focus of social and political change in the 1950s and 1960s. Even though *A Lesson Before Dying* takes place before this peak of the Civil Rights Movement, many events throughout the 20th century laid the foundation for a movement that would change the nation. Through various forms of demonstration and legislation, Civil Rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X were able to come to the table of political reform and find an audience to listen. It also gave African-Americans like Rosa Parks the power to stand up for Civil Rights in their various walks of life. The following timeline highlights just a few of the events that laid the foundation for the Civil Rights Movement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>Through executive order 8802, President Franklin Roosevelt assures non-discrimination policies in federal hiring.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>Concerned over potential disloyalty, Franklin Roosevelt allows 110,000 Japanese-Americans to be rounded up in the western states and sent to internment camps.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>The first lunch counter sit-in takes place in Chicago. Also, race riots in Detroit leave 34 dead and 675 injured. Race riots in Harlem leave 6 dead.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>Jackie Robinson joins the Brooklyn Dodgers, becoming the first African-American to play major league baseball.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>President Harry Truman issues an executive order requiring integrated units in the armed forces.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

1896: In the case Plessy v. Ferguson, the Supreme Court rules that separate but equal facilities for different races is legal. This gives legal approval to *Jim Crow Laws*.

1900: In Louisiana, poll taxes, a literacy test, and property requirements for voting are enacted.

1909: The National Congress on the Negro convenes, leading to the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

1915: The NAACP successfully challenges the *grandfather clause*, resulting in the clause being outlawed by the Supreme Court.

1916: Many African-Americans begin to leave the South and migrate to the North. By 1919, half a million African-Americans have left agricultural areas of the South for cities like New York, Chicago and Pittsburgh.

1925: The *Ku Klux Klan* marches on Washington.

1943: The first lunch counter sit-in takes place in Chicago. Also, race riots in Detroit leave 34 dead and 675 injured. Race riots in Harlem leave 6 dead.

1947: Jackie Robinson joins the Brooklyn Dodgers, becoming the first African-American to play major league baseball.

1948: President Harry Truman issues an executive order requiring integrated units in the armed forces.

*Grandfather Clause*: stated that a man could vote if his father or grandfather had been registered by 1867 — the year before African-American suffrage had gone into effect. This prevented the majority of African-Americans in the South from voting.

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*http://www.btpl.org/answers/readersguide.pdf*
*http://www.home.earthlink.net/~gfeldmerth/chart.civrights.html*
*http://teacherlink.org/content/social/instructional/afeducation/background.htm*
*http://www.naacpbaltimore.org/mission.html*
*http://louisianahistory.ourfamily.com/civilrights.html*
*http://www.mc3.edu/sa/lib/guides/klan.pdf*
*http://www.library.arizona.edu/images/jpamer/wraintro.html*
Racism

RACISM: the belief that race accounts for differences in human character or ability and that a particular race is superior to others, and the discrimination or prejudice based on that belief.

Attempts have been made to classify humans since the 17th century, when scholars first began to separate types of flora and fauna. During the 19th century, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach was the first to divide humanity according to skin color. In the late 19th and early 20th century, people such as Joseph Arthur Gobineau and Houston Stewart Chamberlain, mainly interested in pressing forward the supposed superiority of their own kind of culture or nationality, began to attribute cultural and psychological values to race. This approach, called racism, has been embraced by both individuals and governments throughout the course of history.

THE JIM CROW LAWS

In United States history, the Jim Crow Laws were statutes enacted by Southern states and municipalities, beginning in the 1880s, that legalized segregation between African-Americans and Caucasians. The Supreme Court ruling in 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson that separate facilities for Caucasians and African-Americans were constitutional encouraged the passage of discriminatory laws. Railways and streetcars, restaurants, theaters, and public parks were segregated; separate schools, hospitals, and other public institutions, generally of inferior quality, were designated for African-Americans.

THE HOLOCAUST

The Holocaust was the intentional persecution and extermination of European Jews by Nazi Germany. Persecution of Jews began with Hitler’s rise to power in 1933. Jews were disenfranchised, then terrorized in anti-Jewish riots, their property seized, and finally were sent to concentration camps. After the outbreak of World War II, Hitler established death camps to secretly implement what he called “the final solution of the Jewish question.” By the end of the war 6 million Jews had been systematically murdered.

THE INDIAN CASTE SYSTEM

The Caste System refers to the ancient fourfold division of Hindu society: first, the priestly and learned class; second, the warriors and rulers; third, the farmers and merchants; fourth, the peasants and laborers. Below this fourth class were the Untouchables, who performed the most menial tasks and were shunned by society. While these classifications began primarily as economic divisions, the occupational barriers among Indian castes have been breaking down since the 19th century. Social distinctions, however, have been more persistent. Although untouchability has been illegal since 1949, prejudice to Untouchables has remained strong.

Challenge Question

A Lesson Before Dying shows how racism can contaminate a society, even affecting branches of government. In what ways does this happen today?

*http://www.encyclopedia.com
Capital punishment does not deter crime. Scientific studies have consistently failed to demonstrate that executions deter people from committing crime. The respected Thorsten Sellin studies of the United States in 1962, 1967 and 1980 concluded that the death penalty was not a deterrent.

The death penalty is applied at random. Politics, quality of legal counsel and the jurisdiction where a crime is committed are more often the determining factors in a death penalty case than the facts of the crime itself. The death penalty is a lethal lottery: of the 22,000 homicides committed every year 300 people are sentenced to death.

Capital punishment goes against almost every religion. Although isolated passages of the Bible have been quoted in support of the death penalty, almost all religious groups in the United States regard executions as immoral.

**Did you know?**

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**JAUNILES ON DEATH ROW**

* International human rights treaties prohibit anyone under 18 years old at the time of the crime being sentenced to death or executed. More than 110 countries whose laws still provide for the death penalty for at least some offenses have laws specifically excluding the execution of child offenders. A small number of countries, however, continue to execute child offenders.

* Seven countries since 1990 are known to have executed prisoners who were under 18 years old at the time of the crime - the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the United States and Yemen. Pakistan and Yemen have since raised the minimum age to 18. The country which has carried out the greatest number of known executions of child offenders is the United States (13 since 1990).

* Amnesty International recorded three executions of child offenders in 2002: all three of them were in the state of Texas in the United States. Another child offender was executed in the state of Oklahoma in April 2003.

**THE ELECTRIC CHAIR**

In 1886, the New York State Government established a legislative commission to study humane forms of capital punishment. At that time hanging was the number one method of carrying out the death penalty, even while considered too slow and painful a method of execution. Today Alabama and Nebraska are the only 2 states in the United States to use electrocution as a method of execution.

* http://www.deathpenalty.org
* http://inventors.about.com/library/weekly/aa102497.htm
* http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org
* http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index
Since the beginning of time, capital punishment has been embraced by many different cultures. The first legal execution occurred in 1622 in Virginia with Daniel Frank, executed for theft. Nearly four hundred years later, capital punishment is still a hotbed of debate and controversy. Those in favor of it claim to fight for “victims rights.” Those opposed quote the Eighth Amendment, prohibition of “cruel and unusual” treatment of inmates. Especially in the 20th and 21st centuries, various court cases, legislation, and executions have fueled the fire of debate.

**Capital Punishment Timeline**

**1907-1917:** A short lived abolitionist wave leads to the repeal of death penalty statutes in eight states. However, all but two of those states later reinstate the death penalty, largely to combat lynchings and other forms of vigilantism. As citizens in the United States began to panic about the domestic threat in the wake of the Russian Revolution, the abolition movement began to lose support during the 1920s.

**1924:** Nevada is the first state to adopt lethal gas as an execution method, following the use of poisonous gas in WWI, and executes Gee Jon for murder. The state tried to pump cyanide gas into Jon’s cell while he slept, but this proved impossible, and the specially designed gas chamber was constructed.

**1935:** United States executions reach an all-time high at 199 deaths. This marked the peak of a growing resurgence in capital punishment, due in part to the writings of criminologists, who argued that the death penalty was a necessary social measure and prevented crime.

**Post WWII Era:** In the post-war years a number of factors contributed to a growing movement against the death penalty, including: a revulsion at atrocities witnessed during the war; the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement; attempts by the ACLU and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund to appeal death penalty cases; its abolition in an increasing number of Western countries; and a weakening in public support for the death penalty. During the 1950s and 1960s, 13 states abolish the death penalty.

**1948:** The United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaiming a “right to life.”

**1967:** After Luis Jose Monge is executed in the gas chamber at Colorado State Penitentiary, an unofficial moratorium on executions begins.

**1968:** Courts rule in Witherspoon v. Illinois that prosecuting attorneys have permission to remove potential jurors that "would automatically vote against the death penalty."

**June 1972:** The death penalty is suspended by the Supreme Court in Furman v. Georgia.

**1976:** The death penalty is reinstated in the case Gregg v. Georgia. The Supreme Court ruled that the death penalty is no longer an unconstitutional violation of Eighth Amendment rights.

**January 17, 1977:** Ten-year moratorium on executions ends with the execution of Gary Gilmore by firing squad in Utah.

**1982:** Texas performs the first lethal injection with the execution of Charlie Brooks. The U.S Supreme Court rules in Edmund v. Florida, that death sentence may not be imposed upon a felony-murder accomplice when he did not kill, or intend that deadly force be used. Such a punishment violates the Eighth Amendment.

**1984:** Velma Barfield is executed in North Carolina. She is the first woman executed since reinstatement of the death penalty. By 2000, 55 women will be on death row and 4 others executed.

**1985:** Since the Witherspoon v. Illinois decision was viewed as unconstitutional, the U.S Supreme Court rules in Wainwright v. Witt that a prospective juror can be excused if their views on the death penalty would "substantially impair their performance or duty as a juror."
**1986:** The U.S. Supreme Court rules in Ford v. Wainright that it is unconstitutional to execute the insane. This would become a topic of debate for years, also affecting legislation regarding the execution of the mentally handicapped. The Supreme Court also rules in Batson v. Kentucky that a Prosecutor cannot exclude African-American jurors on the basis of race, when the defendant is African-American.

**1989:** The U.S. Supreme Court rulings: Stanford v. Kentucky; the Constitution does not prohibit the execution of 16-year-olds who commit murder. Penry v. Lynaugh; executing mentally retarded persons does not violate the Eighth Amendment.

**1993:** Washington executes Westley Dodd by hanging, the first in decades. Indiana law is amended to permit juries the option of recommending Life Without Parole.

**1994:** Support for the death penalty reaches an all time high. Gallup Poll shows nationwide death penalty support at 80%. Indiana law prohibits a Prosecutor from seeking a death sentence against a mentally retarded individual.

**1995:** Delays in death penalty cases reach a peak with those executed spending an average of 11 years, 2 months awaiting execution.

**1996:** Congress passes the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, restricting a prisoners' access to new state hearings for claims of actual innocence and provides that only "unreasonable" unconstitutional state rulings could be overturned: establishes filing deadlines for all outstanding claims; and requires competent post conviction counsel for defense.

**1998:** Washington executes Billy Bailey by hanging after he refuses lethal injection.

**2000:** Illinois Governor Ryan announces a moratorium on Illinois executions following repeated reversals of death sentences and appoints a panel to investigate.

**2000:** Gallup Poll shows death penalty support at 66%, its lowest level in 19 years. Incredibly, according to the same poll, 11% believe that one in five on death row are innocent. Florida death row inmate Frank Lee Smith, who died of cancer after 14 years on death row, is cleared after his death by DNA testing. Nine other death row inmates across the country have been exonerated by DNA testing, according to the Innocence Project, a New York-based group that provides legal assistance to prisoners.

**May 2001:** Missouri passes a law banning the execution of the mentally retarded. Of the 38 states which authorize the death penalty, 15 ban such executions.

**June 2001:** Convicted in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing that killed 168 people, Timothy McVeigh, waives all appeals intent on becoming a martyr for his cause. He is the first federal prisoner since 1963 to be executed.

**2001:** Georgia's Supreme Court became the first in the country to rule that electrocution is an unconstitutionally cruel and unusual punishment, stating that death by electrocution "inflicts purposeless physical violence and needless mutilation that makes no measurable contribution to accepted goals of punishment."

**May 2002:** Maryland Governor Parris Glendening imposes a moratorium on executions in Maryland until completion of a study on racial bias in the use of the death penalty.

**June 2002:** The U.S. Supreme Court rules in Atkins v. Virginia that execution of the mentally retarded constitutes cruel and unusual punishment, a reversal of 1989’s Penry v. Lynaugh. 18 states now forbid execution of the mentally retarded by state law.

*http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org
*http://www.clarkprosecutor.org
Illinois Moratorium on the Death Penalty

Illinois Governor George Ryan imposed a moratorium on the state’s death penalty on January 31, 2000. According to the moratorium, all lethal injections were to be postponed indefinitely pending an investigation into why more executions have been overturned than carried out since 1977, when Illinois reinstated capital punishment.

Many believe that Governor Ryan’s declaration of moratorium reinvigorated the national and international movement to end state executions. Concerned that Illinois nearly executed an innocent person, Governor Ryan’s moratorium announcement sent the standard for the reexamination of the death penalty. Ryan said, “Until I can be sure that everyone sentenced to death in Illinois is truly guilty, until I can be sure that no innocent man or woman is facing a lethal injection, no one will meet that fate.”

“The facts I have seen in reviewing each and every one of these cases raised questions not only about the innocence of people on death row, but about the fairness of the death penalty system as a whole.” ~Governor George Ryan

THE ILLINOIS COMMISSION ON CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Shortly after his announcement of the statewide moratorium, Governor Ryan created a special panel to study the state’s capital punishment system. Their goal was to determine what reforms, if any, would make application of the death penalty in Illinois fair, just, and accurate.

The Commission’s final report took well over 200 pages and came up with a solid list of 85 recommendations on how to overhaul the state’s death penalty system to reduce the chance of sending the innocent people to their deaths, and to correct other problems with the state’s death penalty law. Most of the 85 recommendations set forth by the Commission are rather inexpensive and all, save one or two, applicable to every state that chooses to retain capital punishment. Some of the recommendations set forth by the committee include recommendations for police training in homicide cases, mandatory legal education for judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys & police, and expansion of mitigating circumstances.

GOVERNOR RYAN REPRIEVES ALL 167 INMATES ON DEATH ROW

Acting just 48 hours before the end of his term, Governor Ryan commuted all Illinois death sentences to prison terms of life or less, the largest such emptying of death row in U.S. history. Most of the 167 inmates are now serving life without parole.

“I no longer shall tinker with the machinery of death.” ~Governor George Ryan

*http://www.amnestyusa.org/nwsa/moratorium_il.html
*http://www.cnn.com/2000/US/01/31/illinois.executions.02/
*http://www.newyorker.com/printable/?fact/030106fa_fact
*http://capitaldefenseweekly.com/comparisons/html
*http://www.iht.com

Challenge Question
Governor Rod Blagojevich called former Governor George Ryan’s actions “a big mistake.” If you were governor, would you have made the same decision?
In politics:
The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor shattered the United States isolationism. As President Franklin D. Roosevelt guided the country on the homefront, Dwight D. Eisenhower commanded the troops in Europe. General Douglas MacArthur and Admiral Chester Nimitz led them in the Pacific. Although there were rumors throughout the war, it was only after the war ended that Americans learned the extent of the Holocaust, and the number of Europeans lost at the hands of Hitler.

In the working world:
Unemployment almost disappeared, as most men were drafted and sent off to war. The government reclassified 55% of their jobs, allowing women and African-Americans to fill them. First, single women were actively recruited to the workforce. In 1943, with virtually all the single women employed, married women were allowed to work.

In medicine:
The successful use of penicillin by 1941 revolutionized medicine. Developed first to help the military personnel survive war wounds, it also helped increase survival rates for surgery.

In technology:
Television made its debut at the 1939 World Fair, but the war interrupted further development. In 1947, commercial television with 13 stations became available to the public. The digital computer, named ENIAC, weighing 30 tons and standing two stories high, was completed in 1945.

On the home front:
Returning GI’s created the Baby Boom. Realization of the power of prejudice during the war, both abroad and at home, lead to the Civil Rights reforms over the next three decades. The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, also known as the GI Bill of Rights, entitled returning soldiers to a college education. In 1949, three times as many college degrees were earned as in 1940. College now became available to the capable rather than the privileged few.
African-Americans in Popular Culture

ART

Due to the war, the center of the western art world shifted from Paris to New York. Abstract Expressionism, also known as the New York School, was chaotic and shocking in an attempt to maintain humanity in the face of insanity. Jackson Pollock was the leading force in abstract expressionism, along with Willem de Kooning, Ad Reinhardt, and Franz Kline. Thanks to the Harlem Renaissance, an explosion of African-American art, music and literature in the 1920’s, painters such as Jacob Lawrence, Lois Mailou Jones and Edward Burra gained more prominence in what was once a predominately Caucasian arena.

THEATER

As abstract themes infiltrated mainstream theater, African-Americans also began to leave their mark on the genre. African-American actors and playwrights were forced to conform to the expectations of Caucasian theater audiences. The surge and prominence of talent during the Harlem Renaissance paved the way for playwrights to emerge in the middle of the twentieth century. Alice Childress wrote Florence in 1949, first produced in New York at The American Negro Theatre, directed by and starring Childress. In 1944 she had a role in the Broadway production of Anna Lucasta (Tony Award nomination.) This growth was also helped by the founding of dramatic groups during the 1940s, including The Suitcase Theater in Harlem, and the Skyloft Players in Chicago, all founded by Langston Hughes.

FILM

Movies reached their height of popularity during the forties. In 1914, Sam Lucas became the first African-American actor to have a lead role in a film. This helped pave the way for other African-Americans in the 1940s, including Lena Horne, who was the first of a new generation of African-American actresses who rejected stereotypes. Horne became a well respected actress, whose 1943 film Cabin in the Sky is noted as the finest performance of her career.

MUSIC AND RADIO

Radio was the lifeline for Americans in the 1940’s, providing news, music and entertainment, much like television today. At the beginning of the decade, big bands dominated popular music. Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman led some of the more famous bands. Be-Bop and Rhythm and Blues, grew out of the big band era toward the end of the decade, epitomized by Dizzie Gillespie, Billy Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald.

BOOKS

African-Americans such as Langston Hughes also emerged in the literary world. A noted poet, novelist, and short-story writer, Hughes became one of the foremost interpreters of racial relationships in the United States. He earned acclaim for many of his works including The Weary Blues, Not Without Laughter and The Way of White Folks.
Lesson Plans
- Capital Punishment  Page 33
- Faith            Page 34
- Heroism          Page 35
“Run away, go ahead! He can’t! So you are both wronged by the white man. I know that. We all are. What does it change? Nothing. What changes things, is you and me staying here and teaching the children. Teaching you say is for nothing! Some of it is, but not all! Not every life gets lost!”

~Vivian Baptiste, *A Lesson Before Dying*, Romulus Linney
Grade Level: 5-12
Concept:
Increase understanding and appreciation of *A Lesson Before Dying* through classroom discussions and drama activities.

**Primary Subject:** Social Studies
**Connection to other Subjects:** English, Drama

**State Goals Addressed:**
State Goal 2: Read and understand literature representative of various societies, eras, and ideas
State Goal 3: Write to communicate for a variety of purposes
State Goal 4: Listen and speak effectively in a variety of situations
State Goal 5: Use the language arts to acquire, assess, and communicate information
State Goal 25: Know the language of the arts
State Goal 26: Through creating and performing, understand how works of art are produced
State Goal 28: Use the target language to communicate within and beyond the classroom setting

**General Goals:** Using a line from the text of *A Lesson Before Dying*, students begin to explore some of the poetic scenes from the book through working in small groups and a theatrical medium helping the students to take some ownership over the material.

**Specific Objectives:** Students free write from a prompt from the book, students brainstorm scenarios based on the prompt, student create living snapshots.

**Materials:** Each student will need a pen and paper.

**Anticipatory Set:** Students free write for five minutes from the prompt "I was there yet I was not there." This line is the first line of the book *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest Gaines. Students should write without lifting their pen off the paper. They should not worry about grammar or spelling and should write as honestly as possible and without censoring themselves.

**Step by Step Procedures:**
Teacher solicits from students some sharing of their free writes. Each student should then select their favorite sentence or phrase in their writing and circle it. Then, as a class, discuss what that line means. Brainstorm different scenarios where that line could be spoken. Write these scenarios on the board.

Discuss snapshots or photographs and how they capture an individual moment. Elicit from class what is in a "good" snapshot. The best snapshot will provide clues to the before and after of the photo.

Divide class into groups of three to four students per group. Each group must pick one of the scenarios on the board. Using their three sentences selected from their free writing as their only dialogue (which they can repeat as often as they like), students will create a "living snapshot" entitled "I was there yet I was not there." The guidelines they should follow in creating their pieces are:
- one line shouted, one line whispered
- slow motion
- a clear beginning, middle, and end

Providing the above ingredients for your students will give them a structure to help them move forward in creating their pieces. As they work together, the teacher can move from group to group encouraging the students to get on their feet with their ideas rather than discussing them.

Snapshots should take about ten minutes to create. Make sure to leave time for your students to share their work with each other. The "audience" can pay special attention to if the group used their ingredients and if the story their snapshot told was clear.

**Closure: EYE CONTACT CIRCLE**
Students stand close together in a circle. They are given one minute to silently make eye contact with each one of their classmates. No talking, gesturing, or touching. Just eyes. A good closing "ritual" for a class. An opportunity to thank classmates and celebrate accomplishment.

Discuss with class that they will be seeing *A Lesson Before Dying* at Steppenwolf and that they just worked with the first line from the book.
Faith

LESSON PLAN by Robin Chaplik

A Lesson Before Dying by Ernest J. Gaines is a novel full of religious symbolism. Gaines makes numerous analogies between his character Jefferson (a man condemned to death by the law) and Jesus. Prayer, Christmas, and Easter figure into the story as well. There are even scriptural connotations to the word "lesson." So faith, in a religious sense, is a strong theme in the book. Gaines also explores other aspects of faith through the struggle of his main character Grant. Grant believes in God but refuses to attend church - to his Aunt's and the church Reverend's chagrin. He lives amongst a community he yearns to leave, works as a teacher but wishes for another profession. He makes a journey in faith over the course of the story.

1) Have students FREE WRITE on the topic: Faith.

Activity Title: FREE WRITING
Appropriate Ages/Grades: Sixth Grade and Up
Description: An automatic writing exercise. Students write continuously for three minutes on a given topic.
Coaching Hints: Encourage students to write in cursive and not stop to read over their work or judge it negatively. All their ideas, words, and images are good! Allow students the freedom to be abstract - a free write is not a linear essay. It is involves free-associating. As images float across students' minds, they record them.
Utility: An exercise to help students capture images and ideas from their own minds to use in their writing and performing.

2) Brainstorm the topic FAITH with your students using a CONCEPT WEB.

Activity Title: CONCEPT WEBBING
Appropriate Ages/Grades: Sixth Grade and Up
Description: Write FAITH in the center of the chalkboard. Encourage your students to list out loud the things they think of when they hear the word. Some examples:
- Religion / Belief / My sister’s name is Faith / Trust...
Write these ideas on the board with lines connecting them to the original word. Then web some of these ideas. For instance, RELIGION. Some examples:
- God / Jesus / Synagogue / Hinduism / Sunday...
Or, BELIEF. Some examples:
- The world is round
- My family loves me
- Only fools believe
- There is life on other planets

Coaching Hints: Don't be afraid to ask questions to stimulate the exercise (i.e., What kinds of beliefs do people hold?)
Utility: Webbing creates a visual image of ideas generated by students. The image functions as a map of the connections students make.

3) Students explore web ideas on FAITH through TABLEAUX.

Activity Title: TABLEAUX
Appropriate Ages/Grades: Sixth Grade and Up
Description: A tableau is a frozen stage picture - a dramatic representation of a moment in a story or a theme. Students break into groups. Each group selects an idea in the FAITH concept web that represents Grant, Reverend Ambrose, or the struggle between the two characters. Groups create tableaux expressing their selection. Each tableau must have a title comprised of words from the novel. Titles can be long or short. Communicating the title is part of tableau presentation. Titles can be announced before, during, or after the tableau is performed - by one, two, or all group members.
Coaching Hints: Students in a tableau do not have to be physically connected. Space between performers can be used to demonstrate the nature of the characters' relationships. For instance, a group might choose to put a lot of distance between Grant and Reverend Ambrose if it chooses a moment from the beginning of the book. That distance may close if it chooses a moment at the end of the book. Different levels and interesting poses should also be used in creating tableaux. Whenever possible, encourage students to view each other's tableaux from all angles to experience different meanings.
Utility: A picture paints a thousand words! Creating and standing in images based on concepts and themes can be a powerful way to explore ideas. Students see and feel relationships and patterns. Building images with their bodies allows them to "enter" and contribute to an idea's dynamics.

4) Hold a post-activity discussion:
What further ideas on FAITH and its role in the novel were revealed?
How are Reverend Ambrose and Grant similar in their faith and how are they different?
Which man changes and how?
Warm-up: the warm-up can be any activity that focuses your group and acts as a preparation for creative thinking and play. A warm-up can also act as a vehicle for building a sense of ensemble.

a. If possible, push desks aside and work in a circle, this shakes up the class environment and automatically prepares the class to work and think in a different way.

b. Students stand in a circle in a neutral position; hands at their sides, relaxed and lifting tall from the top of their heads. For a minute or so students silently make eye contact with everyone in the circle.

c. The class begins to snap their fingers in a nice even and slow tempo. The teacher counts eight beats for each body part, students create broad circles using all eight counts for one big circle with their heads, right and left, shoulders, forward and back, ribs around right and left, hips circle right and left, ankles and wrists roll right then left. You can continue now in four's, then two's and finally quick body circles in one count.

Heroes embodied:

a. Ask your students to think of a superhero, this character might be imaginary or real - anyone from Wonder Woman to Tiger Woods, but they should try to choose a character that the rest of the class would know. You don't even need to be the same gender as the hero you choose.

b. On the count of three everyone create a snapshot of your hero using your whole body, including your face and your spirit. Practice creating these snapshots several times.

c. Each student shares their snapshot and the class tries to guess who they are.

Create superhero poem:

a. As a group discuss traits of a hero

b. Students can choose to work from their original superhero or choose another hero, perhaps a hero in their own life, a parent, friend, etc. With the following prompts in mind students are given five minutes to freewrite on their hero (meaning stream of consciousness writing, no concern for grammar, complete sentences, spelling etc, just an unleashing of your immediate thoughts):

- include your hero's power(s)
- describe colors associated with your hero
- what words might they typically speak?
- How does your hero move
- Describe their basic character/nature/personality

Here's a quick example of a freewrite:

My mother has the power to heal all the hurts of the world with a squeeze and a "you know you're special to me." My mother can turn your blackest day or bluest night into a yellow breeze. My mother moves quietly treading soft even in heels - smooth with never an alarming move. "Oh Annie!" or "your father makes me so angry sometimes" or "are you eating right?" and she's never lying. Kind and sweet always giving so much that sometimes she's disappearing.

c. Read your words to a partner and together help each other choose the five most exciting, unusual, true, strange and appealing lines or phrases.

d. String these five sentences or phrases into a poem, you can play with the order, edit slightly and each student must choose a line to repeat two-three times. The following is an example of a poem created from the above freewrite:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sometimes she's disappearing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My mother has the power to heal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treading soft even in heels</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>She's never lying</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Your father makes me so angry&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes she's disappearing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Performing your poems:

a. Find beginning and ending snapshot for your character.

b. Read your poem beginning in your opening snapshot and clicking into your ending snapshot after your last line.

c. Discuss the poems and images, you could ask the students to read their poems first without using the snapshots and then with the snapshots to compare the effect on the audience.

Closure for the class:

a. Discuss the role of heroes in our lives and in our culture.

b. Standing in a circle again, focus on breath, taking three deep breaths together. When you make eye contact with someone, trade places with that person on the circle. See how many people you can trade with in one minute.
Creole Community:
MOVIE: Rue Case Negre or “Black Shack Alley” (1983)
BOOK: Rue Case Negre by Joseph Zobel (1955)

Racism/Civil Rights:
BOOKS: The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.
The Autobiography of Malcolm X
Better Day Coming by Adam Fairclough

Capital Punishment:
BOOKS: Dead Man Walking (Helen Prejean)
The Green Mile (Stephen King)

Ernest Gaines:
BOOK: Conversations with Ernest Gaines (John Lowe)
Porch Talk with Ernest Gaines (Marcia Gaudet and Carl Wooton)

Education in the South:
BOOKS: The Second Battle of New Orleans by Liva Baker
Plessy v. Ferguson: Separate but Equal by Harvey Fireside

Romulus Linney:
Sewanee Writers on Writing (Wyatt Prunty)
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