

Heroic Characters in *A Lesson Before Dying*

Level: Grade 10 | Duration: 60 minutes

This one-hour lesson occurs after students have completed reading *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest J. Gaines. The purpose is to assess student understanding of key themes in the novel — heroism and sacrifice — and prepare students to use convincing textual evidence (specifically examples of indirect characterization) to support their own assertions on which of the novel's characters is more heroic. While the lesson asks students to focus on the characters of Grant and Jefferson, it can be modified to include Reverend Ambrose. See Appendix for additional resources. Use this lesson plan with EBSCO's Literary Reference Plus database.

Enduring Understanding

A heroic act involves risk and/or sacrifice.

Essential Questions

1. What qualities does a heroic person possess?
2. What makes an act heroic?
3. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, who is the more heroic character — Grant or Jefferson?

Curriculum Standards

NCTE 2, 4-5, 9, 12 | CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.1, 10.3 | CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1, 10.4

Technology Integration

- SMART Board
- Microsoft PowerPoint or Google Slides
- Access to Literary Reference Plus

Materials

- From Literary Reference Plus:
 - *A Lesson Before Dying* Character Map (AN 149164550)

- Optional: Rimmon-Kenan, S. (2002). Chapter 5: Text: Characterization. In *Narrative Fiction* (pp. 61-72). (AN 17442750)
- PowerPoint Presentation
- Acts of Heroism worksheet
- “A Conversation with Ernest J. Gaines” - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aTHwqrPLu7Y>

Procedure

Prior to this lesson, students will have completed reading *A Lesson Before Dying* and, optionally, Rimmon-Kenan’s chapter on characterization in *Narrative Fiction*.

1. Begin PowerPoint presentation on SMART Board, going as far as Slide 6. (5 minutes)
2. At Slide 7, invite students to come up to SMART Board and jot down answers to first Essential Question: What qualities does a heroic person possess? Discussion. (5 minutes)
3. At Slide 8, invite students to come up to SMART Board to answer second Essential Question: What makes an act heroic? Discussion. (5 minutes)
4. Following discussion, proceed to Slide 9 which reveals Enduring Understanding.
5. Distribute Acts of Heroism Worksheet. Ask students to rank acts on a scale of 1 (most heroic) to 4 (least heroic). You might also consider creating the activity in Google or Microsoft Forms and ask students to rank online. (5 minutes)
6. Discuss and debate rankings as a class. (15 minutes)
7. Review direct and indirect characterization. (5 minutes; slides 11-13)
8. Discuss in small groups whether Grant Wiggins or Jefferson is the more heroic character in *A Lesson Before Dying*. (10 minutes)
9. Watch video: “A Conversation with Ernest J. Gaines” (stop at 7:11 minutes) and distribute Character Map as a refresher of the book’s key characters.
10. Homework assignment: Determine which character you believe is more heroic and write a well-developed open response essay that supports your assertion. Be sure to include 2-3 specific details from the text. Encourage students to consider examples of indirect characterization!

Assessment

Formative

Teacher will assess student understanding of characterization and which qualities/actions make a person heroic based on student responses during Smartboard and handout activities and by observing small group discussion.

Summative

Writing Assignment: Students will generate a thoughtful, convincing and well-written response that includes at least two pieces of textual evidence (examples of indirect characterization) to support their assertions.

Acts of Heroism Worksheet

Directions: Rank the following acts on a scale of 1 (most heroic) to 4 (least heroic).

- ___ Gymnast recovers from paralysis to win Olympic gold medal
 - ___ Nazi saves 1,200 Jews during Holocaust by employing them in his factories
 - ___ School teacher dies in shuttle explosion
 - ___ 11-year-old boy saves little girl's life
 - ___ Passengers of a hijacked airplane die while stopping terrorists' plan
 - ___ Female prison inmates in California volunteer to fight dangerous wildfires
 - ___ Lifeguard rescues drowning boy
 - ___ Medical staff work round the clock to save COVID-19 patients
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Appendix: Additional Resources in Literary Reference Plus

ANs have been included for easy retrieval.

Background

- Gaines, E. J. (2021). *A Lesson Before Dying*. *Literary Context: Novels, Translations, Drama & Essays*, 1-5. (AN 151093863)
- Podolsky, M. J. (2016). Ernest J. Gaines. *Critical Survey of American Literature*, 1029-1036. (AN 127950800)
- Rogers, M. (2015). *A Lesson Before Dying*. *Cyclopedia of Literary Characters*, 4th Edition, 1369-1371. (AN 102943002)
- Rogers, M. (2016). *A Lesson Before Dying*. *Cyclopedia of Literary Places*, 569-570. (AN 127547220)

Poems

- Hughes, L. (n.d.). Mother to son. *Ebony*, 51(1), 99. (AN 9510255317)
- McKay, C. (1922). If we must die. *Book of American Negro Poetry*, 65. (AN 22663607)

Literary Criticism

- Brown, A. G. (2009). Writing for life: "Jefferson's diary" as transformative text in Ernest J. Gaines's "A Lesson Before Dying." *Southern Quarterly*, 47(1), 23-46. (AN 45153198)
- Magill, D. E. (2016). "Make him a man": Black masculinity and communal identity in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*. *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 49(1), 61-76. (AN 123694287)
- Teutsch, M. (2015). Ernest Gaines: A study in domestic exile. *Critical Insights: American Writers in Exile*, 104-117. (AN 114157093)
- Zeitler, M. (2016). "Mr. Joe Louis, help me": Sports as narrative and community in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*. *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 49(1), 129-140. (AN 123694963)